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# **Unmasking online reflective practices in higher education**

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I declare that this thesis has been composed by me and that it is my own work. The work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Jen Ross



# Abstract

Online reflective practices that are high-stakes – summatively assessed, or used as evidence for progression or membership in a professional body – are increasingly prevalent in higher education, especially in professional and vocational programmes. A combination of factors is influencing their emergence: an e-learning agenda that promises efficiency and ubiquity; a proliferation of employability, transferable skills and personal development planning policies; a culture of surveillance which prizes visibility and transparency; and teacher preference for what are seen as empowering pedagogies.

This thesis analyses qualitative interview data to explore how students and teachers negotiate issues of audience, performance and authenticity in their high-stakes online reflective practices. Using mask metaphors, and taking a post-structuralist and specifically Foucauldian perspective, the work examines themes of performance, trace, disguise, protection, discipline and transformation. The central argument is that the effects of both compulsory reflection, and writing online, destabilise and ultimately challenge the humanist ideals on which reflective practices are based: those of a ‘true self’ which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing about thoughts and experiences.

Rather than revealing and developing the ‘true self’, reflecting online and for assessment produces fragmented, performing, cautious, strategic selves. As a result, it offers an opportunity to work critically with an awareness of audience, genres of writing and shifting subjectivity. This is rarely, if ever, explicitly the goal of such practices. Instead, online reflective practices are imported wholesale from their offline counterparts without acknowledgement of the difference that being online makes, and issues of power in high-stakes reflection are disguised or ignored. Discourses of authentic self-knowledge, personal and professional development, and transformative learning are not appropriate to the nature of high-stakes online reflection. The combination creates passivity, anxiety and calculation, it normalises surveillance, and it produces rituals of confession and compliance. More critical approaches to high-stakes online reflection, which take into account addressivity, experimentation and digitality, are proposed.



For my dad, who encouraged my curiosity and gave me the confidence to go looking.  
And for Louise, who is the starting point for all my journeys.





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# Chapter 1: Introduction

Online reflective writing that is summatively assessed, used as compulsory evidence for progression or membership in a professional body, or both, is increasingly prevalent in professional and vocational disciplines in higher education in the United Kingdom. Throughout this thesis I am calling this type of reflection ‘high-stakes’. High-stakes online reflection is also emerging in higher education more generally, through the development and proliferation of national policies for personal and professional development, and related matters such as graduate attributes, transferable skills, and employability. A combination of additional, less explicit factors makes the practice of requiring students to write reflectively online for assessment purposes attractive. These include: an increasing emphasis on producing flexible, self-regulating workers who take responsibility for constantly developing themselves; the belief that knowledge is no longer certain or fixed and that education must be about the student self rather than disciplinary knowledge; time pressures which make extensive observation of students in practice (on placements, for example) less viable for teachers; an e-learning agenda that promises efficiency and ubiquity; a culture of surveillance which prizes visibility and transparency; and teacher preference for what are seen as ‘empowering’ pedagogies.

The main problem addressed by this research is that, despite the increasing implementation of digital and high-stakes reflective practices in higher education courses and programmes, there is a lack of theoretical or empirical work that examines the combined impact of digitality and assessment on reflection. As it stands, and as will be reflected in my review of the literature, there is a small but important body of literature that critically addresses power, assessment and reflection in educational settings, but this is not set in the context of the digital. There is some key literature that looks at online subjectivity in education, but not in the context of reflective practices. And there is a range of work that takes on issues of surveillance, privacy and disclosure in digital culture, including blogging culture, but not in the context of education or assessment. What we are left with is a large gap between what is happening in practice, where teachers and students *are* grappling with high-



stakes reflective practices, and scholarly, well-theorised work that problematises it and puts it in context. This gap is being filled by small-scale, descriptive accounts of practice, which are flourishing as conference papers and articles in educational technology journals. These are radically inadequate to the task of understanding, let alone justifying or optimising, high-stakes online reflective practices.

This thesis offers a theoretical framework for analysing high-stakes online reflection, and in doing so it aims to contribute to a richer and more critical approach to the practices that fall into this category. It looks at practice across a range of subjects, levels and modes. It focuses on how teachers and students negotiate the tensions that are produced when assessment, professional identity and an expectation of authenticity are brought together in an online context, as they are with high-stakes online reflection. My central argument is that the effects of both compulsory reflection, and writing online, destabilise and ultimately challenge the humanist ideals on which reflective practices are based: those of a ‘true self’ which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing about thoughts and experiences. Rather than revealing and developing the ‘true self’, reflecting online and for assessment purposes produces fragmented, performing, cautious, strategic selves.

Using the metaphor of the mask as a structuring principle, and taking a post-structuralist and specifically Foucauldian perspective, this work examines and theorises issues of reflection and develops themes of performance, trace, disguise, protection, discipline and transformation. Along with these mask metaphors, which structure each chapter, there are some topics that run through the thesis as a whole: subjectivity, power and digitality. I argue that high-stakes online reflection offers an opportunity to work critically with these matters, and each chapter’s conclusion offers some ideas about how high-stakes online reflection could be approached differently, in line with a post-structuralist, posthumanist perspective on these broad topics. These concluding sections build towards the final chapter, which suggests further research that could be fruitfully undertaken in this area, and proposes some possible digital futures for reflection.

## Background

This project emerged from a development project about electronic portfolios (e-portfolios), which I led in my role as a learning technologist in the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh in 2005-6<sup>1</sup>. The literature on e-portfolios then, as now, largely took for granted that reflection was beneficial and focused mainly on how it could be supported. There was one paper, however, that proposed certain tensions – what the authors called “competing paradigms” – being disguised by e-portfolio practices (Barrett & Carney, 2005). They called these ‘positivist’ (product-driven, performative, externally assessed, based on externally defined outcomes) and ‘constructivist’ (process-driven, reflective, learner-constructed outcomes) portfolios. They argued that a model of a learner-centred and -owned process, which is intrinsically motivating and a stepping stone towards lifelong reflective practice, sat on one hand, while on the other were institutional and professional demands for accountability, evidence and the performance of professional or academic identities (*ibid*).

In my own experience, students in Education were being asked to evidence their reflective *processes* for the purposes of *assessment*, and so the competing paradigms that Barrett and Carney proposed raised more questions than they offered answers. What happened when these so-called “positivist” and “constructivist” portfolios were one and the same? Preparing for a talk at an e-learning event in late 2005, I proposed the metaphor that has since come to structure my research. Noting the use of ‘mirror’ and ‘map’ as common metaphors for reflection, I offered ‘mask’ as a way of expressing the way in which the “constructivist” disguised the “positivist” in e-portfolio practice. I argued that when what is being assessed or judged is the learner’s ability to be reflective, reflection itself is performative. With my curiosity sparked, and my soon-to-be supervisors supportive, I put forward this doctoral project as a way of exploring this hypothesis further.

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<sup>1</sup> E-portfolio Research & Development in Education @ Edinburgh project: <http://www.erdee.org.uk>. Retrieved 6/8/2011.

## **The landscape of online reflection in UK higher education**

Two factors in particular are converging to produce an increase in online reflection in higher education in the UK. The first is the UK's Quality Assurance Agency's Progress Files initiative (QAA, 2000), which requires universities to provide structure and support for Personal Development Planning (PDP) for all students. This policy move has resulted in a flurry of interest in reflection, especially online reflection, and institutions are embedding PDP at a number of levels, including by assessing it as part of the formal curriculum. This policy is having a major impact on how reflection is perceived and integrated in higher education in the UK: "as enshrined in PDP... reflection is now expected to form part of every student's analytical learning-to-learn armoury" (Clegg, 2004, p.292).

The second factor is the transition, at all levels of the university, from paper-based to electronic practices. Moving practices and procedures online is seen as a natural and unproblematic progression towards efficiency and accountability (Goodfellow & Lea, 2007, p.30), and a sign of the university keeping up with the times. In professional subject areas, these paper-based practices include the tracking and self-observation of students on placements through reflective journals, portfolios and logs. Reflection on practice has been part of the landscape of professional education for several decades (Schön, 1987) and is one of the key pedagogies in disciplines such as education, medicine and social work. There is, therefore, a firmly established precedent for assessing reflection, and both the reflection and the assessment is now moving online. At the present time the most common online environments for reflection are weblogs (blogs) and e-portfolios. Often these environments are provided at institutional level for PDP purposes and are adopted and adapted by programmes for their own use in assessing reflection. Some programmes opt to use their own bespoke or off-the-shelf environments, and occasionally they use tools or environments provided by professional bodies connected with their disciplines.

I have found it helpful to group online reflective practices in higher education into four main categories: informal, extra-curricular, low-stakes and high-stakes. Some students, tutors, lecturers and researchers engage in voluntary reflective writing, primarily weblogging (blogging), outside the formal structures of their institutions. These practices can be intimately connected with research, teaching and learning but are *informal* in nature. *Extra-curricular* activities, structures or processes are often now put in place in institutions to support transferable skills, PDP, and employability agendas. These are usually unrelated to formal coursework, and are often supported by careers staff, personal tutors or directors of study, or provided as optional and non-supported activities through an institutional e-portfolio or purpose-built PDP system. These activities are both dependent upon and intended to foster self-motivated learners who value reflection and are prepared to invest time in writing about their own progress in an institutionally-provided or -sanctioned digital space (Clegg, 2004).

Online reflection is sometimes included as part of a course or programme as a non-assessed, non-compulsory, peer-assessed or minimally formatively assessed component. In some cases this *low-stakes* reflection is intended as a developmental stage towards a summatively assessed project. In other cases, it is supposed to be entirely student-led and (particularly in professional education) habitual as students strive to become members of professional communities which prize self-regulation and continuing professional development. In addition, discourses of ‘effective’ or ‘deep’ learning often privilege the ability to reflect and self-regulate as the hallmark of a good student (Nota, Soresia, & Zimmerman, 2004). Teachers are sometimes wary of assessing reflective writing directly as it is assumed to be an inappropriate object of judgment or measure of quality (Hargreaves, 2004; Hinett, 2002). Competing discourses, which claim that to be a good student you have to reflect, but reflective writing belongs outside the academic gaze, may partly account for the many reports in the literature about confusion and modest participation from students in low-stakes reflection (Tosh, Light, Fleming, & Haywood, 2005).

I have defined *high-stakes* reflection as reflection which is summatively assessed or which serves a gatekeeping function in terms of entry, progression or continued membership in a profession or professional body (Ross, 2011). The specific rubrics or standards applied to these practices vary from discipline to discipline and course to course, as do the models of reflection they are based on, but they usually involve judgments of critical thought, the application of theory, evidence of growth and development, and the impact of institutional learning on individual practice. This category of reflection has been the focus of my research.

There is no quantitative research that conclusively establishes the prevalence of high-stakes online reflection in the UK. The work of the UK's Centre for Recording Achievement over the past five years provides the best picture available. In a recent article, Strivens and Ward (2010) reported the results of a 2008 survey of universities with regard to their progress with PDP provision for students. In this survey, 59% of the 85 institutions that responded<sup>2</sup> self-reported that PDP was "mostly" or "very well" established at undergraduate level, and more than 60% made the same claim for their postgraduate provision (Strivens & Ward, 2010, p.7). When asked about assessment:

over two-thirds of respondents claimed that PDP activities were assessed in their institution. Over 80% of respondents said that PDP was embedded in credit-bearing modules in at least some curriculum areas, however, 70% said that PDP was also delivered outside the curriculum for some students, typically through personal tutors. (*ibid*)

In a project funded to look at the use of e-portfolios for formative and summative assessment, the Centre for Recording Achievement produced case studies of 34 programmes which, in 2008, were making use of such assessment (Strivens et al., 2009). Twenty-eight of these programmes (82%) included a summative element. This study found, as I have, that while there is a range of subject areas incorporating online reflection into their practices, those that are assessing reflection are most

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<sup>2</sup> 133 institutions are recognised by Universities UK, the representative organisation for the UK's universities, at time of writing: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/AboutUs/Pages/About-Us.aspx> , retrieved 13 August, 2011.

likely to be professional or vocational. This is likely to reflect the extensive prior experience of reflective practice, and the establishment of reflection as a legitimate form of academic discourse, in these disciplines.

These numbers should be treated with caution, and not used to make too many assumptions about the sector as a whole, for several reasons. First, even in programmes that are reported as undertaking some form of summative assessment of PDP, the actual practices this encompasses can vary considerably: from a pass/fail log, to activities which are incorporated into essays but not assessed directly, to activities which are directly assessed within a portfolio. In addition, not all activities which are considered PDP would necessarily have a reflective element. Résumé or CV-building tools, for example, are a common feature of e-portfolio environments. Second, there are other types of online environment used for assessing reflection; principally blogs. Third, as Strivens et al note, there is under-representation of research-intensive institutions amongst respondents, and the assessment of online reflective practices in those institutions might be different in character and quantity to those in teaching-led universities.

Nevertheless, what can be concluded from this data is that high-stakes online reflection is taking place in higher education in the UK, and that while it may still be a minority activity, it is not a peripheral one. Indeed, I predict that professional education is leading the way in practices that will become more mainstream in even traditional academic disciplines, as the employability and transferable skills agenda takes greater hold across university education and programmes are required to show how their students are being prepared for their working lives.




## **The metaphor of the mask**

When worn, masks produce hybrids of the body and technology – Pollock (1995) calls them “body techniques” (p.581). They are artificial, in the sense that they are not materially of the body. However, their relationship to the face, and to identity, is profound. They can be formed to replicate the face (as in the case of death masks), to protect the face (as with armour or work masks) or to hide the identity of the wearer

(as with disguises). I propose the metaphor of high-stakes online reflection as ‘mask’ as a useful way to think about matters of audience, authenticity and normativity, and I have identified six genres of mask: performance, trace, disguise, protection, discipline and transformation (Ross, 2011). This thesis is structured so that each of the chapters that present data from my research (Chapters 4–9) discusses and theorises one kind of mask.

In this thesis, I am using these genres as follows.

### *Genres of mask used in this thesis*




 3	<p><b>performance</b> – masks worn to portray a character, for the benefit of an audience. Chapter 4 explores how students perform particular sorts of reflective identities, and their awareness of different sorts of audiences in doing so.</p>
 4	<p><b>trace</b> – death masks, which are commemorations of a person who has died, and are more or less faithful representations, or traces, of that person, formed from an impression of their face post-mortem. Chapter 5 asks how we might see digital archives and databases, which store the reflective writing of students, as traces, and what this implies about subjectivity, authenticity and ownership.</p>
 5	<p><b>disguise</b> – masks that are intended to hide a person’s identity. Chapter 6 applies the metaphor of the mask as disguise to reflective practices themselves, showing how ‘authenticity’ and ‘development’ disguise practices of surveillance and confession, and the governmentality of reflection.</p>

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<sup>3</sup> Creative Commons licensed work by Giant Ginkgo, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/giantginkgo/162974551/>

<sup>4</sup> L’Inconnue de la Seine, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inconnue.jpg>. Retrieved 6/8/11.

<sup>5</sup> Stock image by Brasil2, <http://www.istockphoto.com>

 <p>6</p>	<p><b>protection</b> – strong masks worn to protect the face and head while doing dangerous work. Reflection is normative in its use of templates and the presence of legitimate narratives, as will be discussed in Chapter 7. These can protect students from the vulnerability of confession, but at the cost of limiting and constraining other possibilities of expression.</p>
 <p>7</p>	<p><b>discipline</b> – masks with a normative dual purpose of restraining or injuring the wearer, and displaying the consequences of unacceptable behaviour to the wider community. The normativity of reflection in professional education produces professional identities through processes of repetition and training, with the aim of shaping the practice of would-be professionals. This is discussed in Chapter 8.</p>
 <p>8</p>	<p><b>transformation</b> – masks worn during rituals or ceremonies to enhance states of liminality and produce transformative effects on the wearer and the community. Reflection is intended to transform practice and selfhood through contemplation over time, but in Chapter 9 I explore how online reflection can produce shifts in subjectivity which relate to speed, risk and fragmentation.</p>

There have been three main fields of study that have focused on the mask: social anthropology, social psychology and theatre studies. Where I draw on existing analysis of masks in subsequent chapters, this comes mainly from theatre studies (Chapters 4 and 8), and from social anthropology (Chapter 9). Here I briefly outline the general perspectives taken by these three disciplines to show some of the many ways the mask has been thought about as cultural artefact, metaphor and apparatus.

<sup>6</sup> Stock image by KeithBinns, <http://www.istockphoto.com>

<sup>7</sup> © 2005 David Monniaux; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Branks\\_dsc05369.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Branks_dsc05369.jpg). Retrieved 6/8/2011.

<sup>8</sup> Stock image by stellalevi, <http://www.istockphoto.com>



From a social anthropological perspective, masks are deeply revealing of cultural values and understandings. They can deliberately produce new sorts of identities, through ritual or performance masks, or can, through discipline masks, enforce acceptable standards of behaviour and identity. Pollock (1995) argues that the relationship of the mask to its meaning is not arbitrary, but calls on the conventions through which identity is “displayed, revealed or hidden” in a given culture (p.582). Masks work, he maintains, by “operating upon the particular ways in which identity, or personhood, is expressed in any culture” (p.584). Similarly, Tonkin (1979) argues that a mask “takes meanings on itself and appears charged with Power because it is the focus of concentrated symbolism, whose associated meanings and emotions reverberate off one another” (p.246). It is therefore a site of cultural meaning-making, and masked rituals and performances “can only be understood as a performance with complex interactions between Masks and non-maskers” (p.243).

In social psychology – particularly in the field of symbolic interactionism – approaches to the notion of the mask have been largely metaphorical and have tended to focus on issues of identity and social performances. Symbolic interactionism emerged from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish moralists and Adam Smith’s proposition that action “is (morally) regulated by [a] process of the functioning of the divided ‘looking-glass self’ ... and self-regulated action amounts to conduct” (McCall, 2006, p.3). In the 1920s, American sociologist Robert Park suggested that the role that individuals define for themselves and strive to live up to becomes a mask, and that this mask of the “self we would like to be” is in fact the “truer self” (Park in McCall, 2006, p.8). In the 1950s and 60s, both Anselm Strauss and Erving Goffman explored the notion of performance of self from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Strauss (1997) argued that:

everyone presents himself to the others and to himself, and sees himself in the mirrors of their judgements. The masks he then and thereafter presents to the world and its citizens are fashioned upon his anticipations of their judgements. The others present themselves too; they wear their own brands of mask and they get appraised in turn. (p.11)

Goffman's (1969) work on identity performance in everyday life went further, suggesting that what we think of as unique humanity is a socialized self – a performed character (Branaman, 1997, p.xlix). The self is a doubled self, both “the mask that the individual wears in social situations, [and]... the human being behind the mask who decides which mask to wear” (p.xlvii). Both Strauss and Goffman explored how these performances are constructed and made to appear convincing.

Theatre studies has investigated the nature of the relationship between actor, text and mask in masked performance. Literature in this area is concerned with the expressive possibilities of masks and the challenges of staging performances using them. Emigh (1996) is one key writer who discusses masks from a theatre studies perspective, and he argues that the mask fundamentally changes the nature of theatrical performance:

I learned in stages that I couldn't just take more or less appropriate masks, put them on actor's faces, and have them speak lines from a selected text. I ended up having to rethink the whole process of acting. (p.248)

He describes a time spent in Bali learning to perform with masks. He recounts this story about learning the intricate dance steps that would eventually be performed while wearing a mask:

As I sometimes will do when concentrating, I had my face screwed up and tongue grotesquely stuck out. [My teacher] Kakul stopped and laughed and said ... “your face – what are you doing with your face?” And I said, “Oh, that's going to be covered by a mask anyway.” And Kakul suddenly looked very stern and said that, no, the mask was not a disguise. It hid nothing. (p.249)

The complexity of the mask – in performance, in social contexts, and in cultural discourse – makes it a fruitful metaphor for complex reflective practices. While transformation, disguise and performance have been extensively explored in the literature described above, other less commonly analysed genres – discipline, trace and protection – are equally generative in the context of this research. These genres fit particularly well with a post-structuralist emphasis on discourse, which underpins this research.

## **Power, discourse and post-structuralism**

A post-structuralist, and specifically Foucauldian, perspective has been adopted here because it offers a framework for high-stakes online reflection that takes into account how complex discourses of reflection are produced and reproduced, and how they circulate at individual, ‘classroom’, institutional and societal level.

A central premise of a post-structuralist position is that discourse shapes and bounds what can be said and thought. Foucault (1977b), whose theories of power, confession and governmentality are central to this thesis, defined discursive practices as being:

characterized by the delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories. Thus, each discursive practice implies a play of prescriptions that designate its exclusions and choices. (p.199)

Delimitation, definition and fixing are all normative moves, which have the effect of settling (in some particular context) what counts, and what does not count, as truth. Context matters, because we are always in a historical moment with regards to our power-knowledge configurations:

Power and knowledge are not external to one another. They operate in history in a mutually generative fashion. Neither can be explained in terms of the other, nor reduced to the other. (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p.114)

It is therefore of both interest and relevance to explore the contexts of high-stakes online reflection in higher education, to try to understand how discursive practices in this setting are affecting what students and teachers do and how they can think about matters of reflection and subjectivity. What is particularly productive is to tease out where discourses might come into conflict with one another, as these are the spaces where new things can, and do, take place. Subsequent chapters undertake this work, with Chapters 2, 6 and 8 focusing in particular detail on Foucauldian theory and its use in understanding high-stakes online reflective practice.

## Humanism

A key argument in this thesis is that reflection is based on a humanist ideal of the autonomous, authentic self, and that this ideal is problematic and requires critique. Humanism is and always has been associated with a very broad spectrum of ideas, and as Davies (1997) puts it, “the meaning of ‘humanism’ is the semantic tangle, or grapple, that makes its meanings so difficult to grasp” (p.128). Similarly, Foucault (1984) rejects a reliance on the concept of humanism as explanatory or fixed, because “the humanistic thematic is in itself too supple too diverse too inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection” (online).

I must therefore say here what I mean by humanism. For my purposes, Belsey’s (1985) definition of liberal humanism is suitable:

A commitment to man, whose essence is freedom. Liberal humanism proposes that the subject is the free, unconstrained author of meaning and action, the origin of history. (p.8)

Usher and Edwards (1994) argue that education is fundamentally a humanist enterprise:

The very rationale of the educational process and the role of the educator is founded on the humanist idea of a certain kind of subject who has the inherent potential to become self-motivated and self-directing, a rational subject capable of exercising individual agency. The task of education has therefore been understood as one of ‘bringing out’, of helping to realise this potential, so that subjects become fully autonomous and capable of exercising their individual and intentional agency. (pp.24-5)

These notions of autonomy and agency, of essential human attributes and potential, and of rationality, underpin the understanding of humanism that is critiqued in this research. These are problematic notions, because, as postmodernist and post-structuralist critique has argued, they mask the workings of power and discourse that construct and validate what is called ‘essential’ human nature.

Foucault (2002) argues that the notion of “man” and his so-called essential nature is misguided and dangerous:

Man had long since disappeared and would continue to disappear... our modern thought about man, our concern for him, our humanism, were all sleeping serenely over the threatening rumble of his non-existence. Ought we not to remind ourselves – we who believe ourselves bound to a finitude which belongs only to us, and which opens up the truth of the world to us by means of our cognition – ought we not to remind ourselves that we are bound to the back of a tiger? (p.351)

For Foucault (1982), the important questions are about the shifting historical nature of our subjectivity and its construction (p.777). The purpose of critique is to “move beyond the outside-inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers. Criticism indeed consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits” (Foucault, 1984, online).

“Humanity” is a performance, a process of normativity or ordering through language:

[Foucault] understands that this “order” conditions the possibility of his becoming, and that a regime of truth, in his words, constrains what will and will not constitute the truth of his self, the truth he offers about himself, the truth by which he might be known and become recognizably human, the account he might give of himself. (Butler, 2005, p.30)

Biesta (1998) calls this the “radical historicity of our subjectivity” (p.10), and maintains that what Foucault has offered us is an understanding of subjectivity that frames “man” not as a fact but:

a specific solution to a specific problem. Man, in short, is an answer and the question that needs to be solved is what kind of an answer he is. Foucault gives a clue, in that he presents modernity as a kind of *escapism* that simultaneously tries to acknowledge and deny the finitude of the subject. (p.9)

As a result of the challenges to humanism put forward by Foucault, Biesta has claimed that a postmodernist orientation towards pedagogy is one that has to “do... without a deep truth of what it is to be human. It cannot take recourse to an original nature of the subject (not even its social or political nature)... In this sense, it is a pedagogy without humanism” (p.13) . This thesis explores, in part, what such a

pedagogy without humanism would look like for high-stakes online reflective practices in higher education.

## **Outline of this thesis**

In Chapter 2, I review four strands of literature of particular relevance to this work: governmentality and Foucauldian understandings of power and confession; online subjectivity; reflective practices and writing in higher education; and online reflection. These four strands help to justify and locate the research I have done. Chapter 3 describes the methodology I have used in researching high-stakes online reflection in higher education and the post-structuralist theoretical perspectives underpinning my approach to research more broadly.

Chapters 4–9 are structured around mask genres. They analyse the data generated as part of this project and propose new ways of theorising online and high-stakes reflective practices. Chapters 4 and 5 investigate the outward-facing aspects of high-stakes online reflective practices: first in the performance of reflective identities with an awareness of audience, and second in the digital traces or archives these practices leave behind. To begin here is to upend, right from the start, the humanist figure of the “personal-confessional” self (Bleakley, 2000), in favour of an audience-sensitive, performing, strategic self, producing and then forgetting or renouncing digital fragments. In Chapter 4, I focus on the uneasy alignment of assessment, discourses of reflection, and awareness of audience that characterise the reflective practices in my research, and propose Bakhtin’s theory of addressivity as a means of understanding this uneasiness as a problem, not specifically with assessment, but with conceptions of reflection. Chapter 5 looks at how students and teachers describe, and in some cases deny, the digitality of their practices. Themes of control, privacy, disclosure and ownership emerge and are discussed and analysed. I offer online reflection as a generative space which can work with, not deny, its ‘webness’. These chapters build the contextual frame – the institutional practices of feedback and assessment in the case of performance, and the webness of online reflection in the case of the trace – that the concerns of subsequent chapters will sit within.

Chapter 6 returns to Foucault's theories of confession, surveillance and governmentality first introduced in Chapter 2. It explores in detail the alignment of these theories with practices of online reflection and sets up the discussions of normativity and discipline that follow in Chapters 7 and 8. I argue that discourses of development and authenticity disguise the governmentality of reflection. The workings of power, surveillance and self regulation are explored and illustrated with data from my interviews, and I close by outlining some possible strategies for resistance to problematic discourses of surveillance and authenticity.

In Chapter 7, I explore two aspects of normalisation: how students produce what Hargreaves (2004) has called "legitimate narratives of reflection", and how the templates and interfaces of online reflective tools and environments work to construct a particular vision of reflection and standardise student output within the terms of that vision. I conduct a brief visual analysis of one highly-structured e-portfolio environment, PebblePad, and argue that if we stop attempting to shield students from the experience of the blank page, and stop overstructuring their reflective environments, these can become spaces of activity rather than imitation. Students can negotiate personal styles and find creative ways to produce reflective accounts that are convincing without having to pretend at authenticity.

Chapter 8 proposes that processes of normalisation actively produce new things, though the complexity of disciplinary discourses means these are not necessarily the things that are intended. This chapter positions professional education and practice as a space of supercomplexity and disorder, and argues that teachers in professional and vocational subject areas must acknowledge their own stake in reproducing practices of division, categorisation and regimentation through pedagogies of reflection, and must examine their practices from a political and discursive, not just an individual, perspective. They might then teach students to manage conflicting ways of knowing, while supporting uncertainty and openendedness.

I move on, in Chapter 9, to propose a way of looking at online reflection as a space of shifting subjectivity, speed and digitality, and contrast this with the more typical

story of deep change over time that is usually told about reflection and transformation. The speed and looseness of digital flows presents an opportunity to look towards fragmentation, gatherings and a posthumanist sensibility, and offers ‘fast’ openings through which to experiment with representing subject positions. A critical and conscious appreciation of what webness can offer helps us to reframe reflection for a digital context that has positive gains, not just losses.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, I review the contribution that this research has made, suggest areas of future research that might be undertaken to build on the work I have presented in this thesis, and propose the ‘spectacle’ and the ‘placeholder’ as concepts to underpin fruitful digital futures for reflection.





## **Chapter 2: Power, subjectivity, digitality and reflection – reviewing key literature**

This chapter provides an overview of the literature in four key areas: governmentality, the online subject, reflective practices and writing in higher education, and online reflective writing in blogs and e-portfolios. Taken together, these four strands situate the research I have undertaken. The first two are primarily theoretical, while the latter two engage with the practice context in which this research is immersed.

My research is interdisciplinary, not only in its exploration of high-stakes online reflective practices across a number of disciplinary contexts, but in its connections to cultural studies, educational theory, politics and philosophy. In selecting and discussing ideas in this chapter, I have not attempted to be exhaustive, but rather to provide the most helpful context I can for understanding the research I have undertaken, and the reasons why it is interesting, relevant and necessary.

Each part of this chapter stands alone as an analysis of a specific body of literature relevant to this research. There is an overall argument, too, which is that there are important theoretical perspectives that have not, as yet, been applied to high-stakes online reflection. Discourses of reflection in education have been so overwhelmingly humanist that there has been little room for other possibilities. Perhaps relatedly, debates about online subjectivity have been all but ignored by the literature on online reflection. This chapter asks what questions about high-stakes online reflection are raised by theories of governmentality and online subjectivity, and examines how and where these questions might trouble the rhetoric of reflection so prevalent in educational theory.

This research is heavily indebted to the work of Michel Foucault and to writers who have explicitly applied his thinking to education and reflection. Foucault's theories of the nature of subjectivity, self, language and power have significantly informed my own thinking about the problems and possibilities of high-stakes online reflection

in higher education. In particular, his later work on the technologies of the self and on neo-liberal governmentality, since taken up and expanded on by others, have been crucial in the development of my research. In the next section, I review this work and its application to higher education.

## **Power, governmentality, confession and pedagogy**

Foucault was a French social philosopher whose writing and lectures about the nature of power have been tremendously influential in many disciplines over the past 30 years. His historical analyses of social systems demonstrated that there is nothing natural in the social world, but rather an ever evolving circulation of power, discourse and ideas that govern what can (and, importantly, cannot) be considered not only acceptable, but real. Reality, for Foucault, is a complex discursive construct, and governing reality takes place at the level of societies, institutions and individuals. His work has been taken up by a number of theorists to explain how educational institutions are implicated in the work of governing the self and society, and some of this work will be discussed in this section.

For Foucault, power and discourse are intimately entwined. The ways in which knowledge is constructed and represented through language are the ways in which people can understand and represent themselves (Hall, 2001, p.72) and (as we will see in the next section on online subjectivity) the categories into which they can be sorted. The shifting boundaries of what can and cannot be thought, let alone said, are the primary sites of power in contemporary life. Though Foucault accepts the existence of material things, he claims there is no meaning without discourse (*ibid*, p.73). Furthermore, knowledge and power “operate in history in a mutually generative fashion. Neither can be explained in terms of the other, nor reduced to the other” (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p.114).

Power does not belong to an individual; it is a technology, not an attribute: “it does not matter who exercises power. Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine” (Foucault, 1977a, p.202). In this sense, as Latour (1986) has argued, the person giving a command is less “powerful” than traditional sociological

understandings of social functioning would assume. Power has been understood in a negative, repressive and individual way primarily, Foucault (1998) argues, because “its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (p.86). If power is understood as a limit imposed by another or by a system, which can (perhaps) be resisted, then individuals can retain a sense of agency. If, on the other hand, power is produced and reproduced at the level of discourse, agency is far less clear-cut. Foucault does emphasise the possibility of resistance, claiming that, as Youdell (2006) puts it, “no discourse is guaranteed” because its meanings can shift and “subordinate discourses” can unsettle it (p.515). However, this is still an uncomfortable way to understand power, since it is haphazard and elusive rather than controlled and visible.

Foucault (1982) claimed that the main focus of his work was not power for its own sake, but the “objectivizing of the subject” (p.777). At different times in history, different forms of power have been the primary focus of struggles and resistance: domination, exploitation and subjection. He argues that, in our time, subjection (the making of individuals into subjects) is in the foreground (pp.781-2). To understand the workings of subjection, Foucault (1988) paid particular attention to what he called governmentality, which he describes as “contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self” (p.19). This is both an individualizing and totalizing form of power (Foucault, 1982, p.782), employing a “diffuse set of strategies and tactics” mobilised by policies and laws of institutions and the state to “produce and reproduce subjects, their practices and beliefs, in relation to specific policy aims” (J. Butler, 2006, p.52). It has pastoral power as its primary technique (Foucault, 1982, p.782). Foucault means pastoral quite literally, tracing its origins in the Christian church, which he credits with the invention of a social function (the pastor’s) that concerns itself with the individual mind, soul and “innermost secrets”, and is “linked with a production of truth – the truth of the individual himself” (p.783). Institutions from the state to the family have been mobilized to produce and deploy pastoral power.

The domination of the self works at the level of self-policing, and Foucault claimed in a series of lectures late in his life that a political regime of neo-liberal governmentality has been built upon core principles of tracking and using “human capital”, panoptic (self) surveillance and confession (Lemke, 2001). I move on to discuss this idea, and some work that has emerged from it, in the next section.

### **Human capital, technologies of the self and neo-liberal governmentality**

According to Rabinow and Rose (2006), Foucault’s rationale for thinking about governmentality in general was to understand how collective conduct could be influenced in the service of objectives not explicitly tied to the state (p.200). Foucault traces a shift in writing about governing power from the earliest written works, which advised kings and rulers about how to keep and exercise power, to the 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries, where governing took on a broader set of connotations, referring to governing of the self, of souls in the religious sense, of children through pedagogy, and of the state through sovereign power (Foucault, 1991, p.87). He calls this the ‘art of government’ and analyses writings about Machiavelli’s *The Prince* over several hundred years to understand how their authors “attempted to articulate a kind of rationality which was intrinsic to the art of government”, while detaching this from the figure of the prince himself (p.89). This changing articulation “locates the self as a politically constituted subject” (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p.65). Peters and Burbules (*ibid*) go on to argue that governmentality is a necessary concept because “the limited conception of power as an institutional and prohibitory phenomenon cannot adequately explain the range of power relations that permeate the body, sexuality, family, kinship and discourse” (p.66).

Lemke (2001) provides a useful analysis of Foucault’s claims that 20<sup>th</sup> century “neo-liberal” political perspectives (German and American) have resulted in an understanding of the worker or wage labourer as entrepreneurial in their responsibility for themselves and their development (p.199). By framing social matters in essentially economic terms, neo-liberal theory posits subjects who are intrinsically rational and amenable to participating in cost-benefit analyses of their choices. Rational subjects will accept a conceptual connection between “economic

prosperity and personal well-being” (p.202). The neo-liberal subject has his or her citizenship “manifested through the free exercise of personal choice among a variety of marketed options” (Rose, 1999, p.230). ‘Free’ is often meant ironically by critics of this form of governance; freedom is described as an exercise upon the self (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p.67), and a “resource for, and not merely a hindrance to, government” (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996, p.8).

Neo-liberalism is dominant not only in the functioning of many governments, but also, as we will see, in rationales underpinning the marketisation of higher education, so it is necessary to be clear about what this form of governmentality implies about the construction of self and power. However, there are a number of theories, not all compatible, which fall under the heading of ‘neo-liberal governmentality’. Barnett et al (2008), for example, describe a prevalent but uneasy convergence between “neo-Marxian theories of neoliberal governance” and “Foucauldian theories of governmentality” (p.624), claiming that this convergence mistakenly attributes too much “strategic intentionality” (p.629) to the effects of government, thus moving away from Foucault’s more nuanced understanding of power as circulating, discursive and prone to misfire. They call for the study of “emergent rationalities” of government in all its forms, shifting away from the “wholly strategic conception of action and interaction” they attribute to neo-Marxist proponents of neo-liberal governmentality (p.632).

Rabinow and Rose (2006) critique some current understandings of the related concept of “biopower” in the same terms. Biopower is another Foucauldian term, which Rabinow and Rose (*ibid*) define as a “plane of actuality” characterised by: a) truth discourses and associated authorities focused on the “‘vital’ character of living human beings”; b) ways of intervening in the lives of populations “in the name of life and health”; and c) ways of getting individuals to work on themselves “by means of practices of the self” (p.197). They argue that the neo-Marxist work of Hardt and Negri, for example, empties the concept of biopower of its “critical force”, by positing a simplistic “opposition of a mysterious global Empire to an even more phantom ‘multitude’” (Rabinow & Rose, 2006, p.199).

A general principle of emergent rationalities interests me more than strategic intentionality, though it is not always easy to tease these apart in the literature which draws on governmentality. It may be that any theory of governmentality or biopower is apt to be understood in a strategic sense when applied to situations of practice, perhaps partly as a result of power masking its own mechanisms. However, governmentality in its ‘emergent’ form can shed light on some of what is happening in higher education and how this impacts even on practices which are not supposed to be ‘governed’, such as reflection. Levidow (2002) notes the features of neoliberal strategies in higher education:

- all constituencies are treated through business relationships;
- educational efficiency, accountability and quality are redefined in accountancy terms;
- courses are recast as instructional commodities;
- student-teacher relations are mediated by the consumption and production of things, e.g. software products, performance criteria, etc. (p.229)

In addition, neoliberal and marketised discourses are used to construct everything from the professional development of academics, to the personal development of students, to the rise of the ‘student-consumer’: all of which are influenced by, and influencing, the adoption of technology and the rise of e-learning in the university (Clegg, Hudson, & Steel, 2003). Clegg, Hudson and Steel, in their 2003 close reading of a policy speech given by the then UK minister for education David Blunkett, energetically refute totalising discourses of globalisation and Information Communication Technology (ICT) which, they argue, create rather than describe the conditions of learning as ‘big business’. They claim it is still possible for academics to create critical spaces of contestation, even within a policy context in which the neo-liberal paradigm “systematically denies” such dissent (p.51).

However, the policy agenda outlined above is, in governmentality terms, being transformed and deployed at multiple levels: state, institutional and personal. The academic integrity being called on to create these critical spaces is not innocent; it has been and is being externally and internally managed, and constructed around terms of a debate which have already been laid down.

The personal and professional development agenda in higher education, for example, constitutes individuals as particular sorts of ‘subjects-in-process’, for whom no amount of development is ever enough: “all professional workers need to be developed. Moreover, there should be no end to this process – the true professional knows that learning is for life” (McWilliam, 2002, p.289). Development, reflection, conscientiousness and professionalism are grouped together, providing “scripts for turning ourselves into better (more professional) academics” (p.290). The pressure to be constantly developing shapes individuals to meet the market’s demand for flexible, self-regulating workers who will accept employers’ demands for “explicit confessional critical reflection” (Fenwick, 2001, p.82) and even internalise these in forms of voluntary self-surveillance and confession. Such an agenda affects both teachers and students, and the result is that a process of “audit and regulation displac[es] provision” (Edwards, 2002, p.359). Surveillance and confession in online reflection will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

This neo-liberal vision of higher education frames students as consumer-investors, “making private choices within a game-structure controlled by government” (Marginson, 1997, p.64), and teachers as service providers. Such a model of higher education is of a game whose rules are ultimately those of the market. Immersed in values of commodification, profit, choice and progress, neo-liberal higher education is able to absorb and accelerate even the idea of “reflection” – apparently outside such concerns, so obviously focused on the self, not the system – to fit developmental and externalised values. Davies (2003) argues of teachers in such systems that: “no one can experience themselves as ‘good enough’ when the basis of assessment is externalised, constantly escalating, subject to change, and often at odds with the professional knowledge on which previous good practice was based” (p.95).

If, as Deacon and Parker (1995) argue, “resistance is never opposed to power, rather, power produces multiple points of resistance against itself, and inadvertently generates opposition” (p.118), then the contestation called for by Clegg, Hudson and Steel (2003) is part of the circulation of power and the constitution and reconstitution



of the field of higher education. There are always such spaces, and they do not float independent of the whole – they are an integral part of every paradigm.

### **Surveillance, confession and pedagogy**

It is always possible to be corrected... To become again what we never were is, I think, one of the most fundamental elements... of this practice of the self. (Foucault, 2005, p. 95)

Formal education thrives on forms of pastoral power, surveillance, technologies of the self, and confession. Foucault has written extensively about the techniques of self discipline fostered by the panopticon, a model of surveillance which encourages the subject to believe they may be watched at any time, and therefore to modify their own behaviour to fit the norms of the context in which the panopticon is deployed. This normalising panoptic gaze need rarely, if ever, be ‘real’: its possibility is enough to ensure the desired behaviour in those who are subject to it. At all levels of formal education and development, from computer labs of primary schools (Bayne, Ross, & Williamson, 2008) to the continuing professional development requirements of practicing professionals, the panopticon is at work, and Chapter 6 demonstrates some of its workings in high-stakes online reflection.

Like the panopticon, pastoral power is neither purely an interior nor purely an exterior form of control. Unlike the panopticon, it is not necessarily seen or experienced as negative, and Foucault (1993) stressed in his later work that he felt his earlier theory insisted too much on “techniques of domination” and not enough on the complex relations of power that consist of “subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies” (p.204).

Tell (2007) calls Foucauldian confession a discourse of *identity*, not of *apology* (p.1). According to Fejes (2008), the confessional “other” is “a person to whom one could speak and from whom one could receive guidance” (p.18). Foucault (1993) says that confession can assume an explanatory role because the other’s greater wisdom or seniority “permits him to distinguish between truth and illusion in the soul of the person he directs” (p.219).

The soul is not a pre-existing condition, however: communication, and specifically the “rigorous interpretation” that precedes confession (Tell, 2007, p.1) constructs the self it purports to disclose: “it is the confession, the verbal act of confession, which comes last and which makes appear, in a certain sense, by its own mechanics, the truth, the reality of what has happened” (Foucault, 1993, p.219).

Foucault (1993) concluded that in his time the dominant technology of self was “oriented toward the permanent verbalization and discovery of the most imperceptible movements of our self” (p.222). As pedagogy moves increasingly towards personalised models of learning, the individual student’s self is increasingly seen as a legitimate area of development and disclosure. The persistent rhetoric of change, growth, development and progress envelops both students and teachers in higher education. This is not, as it may at first appear, in contrast with the neo-liberal governmentality discussed above, because “support for narratives focused on the learner become more possible, plausible and more likely, marginalising issues of pedagogy and power. In the process, the power in the pedagogic relationship is reconfigured on the basis that this is simply a manifestation of what it means to be a good teacher” (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006, p.127). Proper teaching, and proper learning, is that which exposes, individualises and obligates students to confess. Confession is a technology “used by the individual to effect changes on him/herself” (Fejes, 2008, p.18), and as Usher and Edwards (1994) have argued, confessional practices inscribe people as needing constant interventions of self-assessment and measurement “against norms apparently of [their] own making” (p.51).

In the context of reflective practice, as we will see in the third part of this chapter, these norms include the principle of consistency and progress over time, and online reflective practices can create tension here. Bayne (2005) found that students experience the online self as a threat to the ‘real’ self, and feel themselves to be invited towards a dangerous fluidity: “without the safety net of our commitment to a truthful, unitary identity, we might fall permanently into another (untrue) version of ourselves. Identity formation online becomes a performance here, with the risk of the role taking control of the player” (pp.32-3). Students may therefore strongly resist a

loss of control they see implicit in the possibility of fragmentation online, and may commit with extra intensity to ‘authenticating’ the self they perform in reflection online.

This authentication may readily take the form of efforts to ‘prove’ their sincerity through what Foucault describes as the ‘obligation to confess’ – a possibility that reflective practice makes available and possibly actively encourages (Gilbert, 2001). Students may be both ‘penitent’ and ‘listener’, in the terms of the confessional described by Hewitt (1991, p.227), when they try to gain a secure footing online through confessional reflection. Through confession, they strive to be “authenticated by the discourse of truth [they are] obliged to pronounce concerning [themselves]” (Foucault, 1981, p.58). Ironically, the structure of the confessional offered (or at least pretended at) a mask of anonymity which high-stakes online reflective practices do not allow. Students are disciplined from within and without in online reflection by urgent demands for authentication. This idea will be taken up in the online subjectivity part of this chapter.

In a lecture in 1980, Foucault (1993) ended hopefully by reflecting on our ability to change the technologies of self which have made self-knowledge and interpretation seem so important:

Do we need, really, this hermeneutics of the self? Maybe the problem of the self is not to discover ...the positive foundation of the self. Maybe our problem is now to discover that the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in our history. Maybe the problem is to change those technologies. (pp.222-3)

In the 30 years since this lecture, technologies of self in higher education at least have become both more hermeneutic and more technological. In the next section of this chapter, on online subjectivity, I will discuss surveillance, the database and what Poster calls the “superpanopticon” in some detail.

### **What's the matter with Foucault? A note of caution**

Lather (1991) asks us not to be taken in by grand narratives (p.137), and in some quarters Foucault's work has been taken up as one such grand narrative, and Foucault himself positioned as one of the "master[s] of truth and justice" (*ibid*) he spoke against. Foucault's work on subjectivity and power works best, perhaps, when it is used to trouble and disrupt overarching frameworks or models, not as a framework itself. This is arguably why many theories of governmentality are so problematic – they have tried to reify a "Foucauldian" model of the workings of power, and reification is exactly what Foucault claims is impossible with power. Power is unpredictable and circulating, the energising force of society: it is not "done to", but "doing". Latour (1986) suggests that if power and society are treated as "outside or beneath" construction (my borrowing of Butler's (1993, p.28) phrase), then social scientists have made explanatory what needs to be explained. He goes on to claim that "the only way to understand how power is locally exerted is... to take into account everything that has been put to one side – that is, essentially, techniques" (p. 277). By exploring the techniques, strategies and interpretations of high-stakes online reflection, I am looking in this research for a way to understand what power is doing, and how it circulates within and beyond the grasp of the people and practices I am focusing on.

### **The online subject: embodiment, archives and fragments**

Working from a post-foundational perspective on self and subjectivity (which I will define further in Chapter 3), perhaps the greatest challenge in thinking about online subjectivity is this: are online subjects individuals, texts, or hybrid posthuman entities enmeshed in networks or "cognispheres" (Hayles, 2006)? These are questions that have not been asked of online reflection, and so one contribution that this research makes is to raise and discuss the nature of the online reflective self. This part of the literature review sets out the arguments for and against each of these three views, drawing out the important points to be made about each in relation to online reflective practices.

## Online subjectivity as individual: embodiment and authentication

The romance of leaving the meat behind, in a consensual hallucination of consciousness-as-data, is, it seems, only ever that. (Bell, 2001, p.176)

Not long after the emergence of the cyberpunk movement in the early 1980s, with its utopian and dystopian visions of cyberspace and virtual reality, came the problematisation of what scholars, and particularly feminist scholars, saw as an attempted demotion or erasure of the body. As Balsamo (1996) puts it: “the phenomenological experience of cyberspace depends upon and in fact requires the willful repression of the physical body” (p.123). She goes on to ask: “how is the disembodied technological gaze marked by the signs or logic of gender and race?” (p.126), and argues that while the body may not always be *represented* in cyberspace or virtual worlds, it continues materially to exist in the interface and the experience of the user in fundamental ways (*ibid*). This continual framing and reframing of cyberspace as a space where bodies continue to exist, and where electronically mediated bodies are constrained by the same social inequalities as they are offline (albeit sometimes inequalities are experienced differently), has been important not only in cyberspace studies (Bell, 2002; Gies, 2008; Muri, 2003; Nakamura, 2008) but also in education (Blake, 2002; Land, 2004) and research ethics (Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002).

Hayles (1999) argues that the posthuman subject as it is commonly understood mirrors the liberal humanist subject in its resolute separation of mind from body: in this case the belief that the mind can travel in virtual spaces unencumbered by the body. Land (2004) terms this the “incorporeal fallacy” (p.532), and maintains that, rather than being disembodied online, being online transforms what it means to be embodied (p.536). We may reconsider the boundaries and nature of individuality and selfhood in the online context, but we are not free to abandon them, because our bodies remain, and remain crucial in our understandings of our socially constructed subjectivity. This connects to an extent with the argument I will make in Chapter 3: the post-structuralist subject, online or off, does not choose from an infinite number of possible selves which identity to perform, but is positioned in particular ways by

discursive structures. Within these structures, only certain kinds of self construction are meaningful or coherent.

The focus here on meaning is a focus on the social. As Bassett and O’Riordan (2002) have argued, the construction of cyberspace *as* space in which human subjects interact implies certain socially situated ways of approaching online subjectivity. Rather than being creatures of complete freedom, anonymity and multiplicity of identity (Turkle, 1997), online subjects are caught in webs of relationships, and the need (or at least the obligation, as we will see Poster argue shortly) to sustain a consistent social self (Ruch, 2009). The embodied individual is at the heart of this understanding of online subjectivity, and the tracking and authentication of that body is one of the key structural principles of the internet today, as its use is increasingly embedded in educational, commercial and civic practices and institutions (Ball, Lyon, Wood, Norris, & Raab, 2006).

The online sites and spaces most likely to be used in higher education are those where online identities are meant to map fairly closely onto offline ‘student’ or ‘teacher’ identities and bodies (in virtual learning environments, for example). Much as reflection is supposed to authentically mirror a stable, autonomous self (as I will argue in the third part of this chapter that it is), so the ‘walled gardens’ of institutional learning spaces online are supposed to provide the authentication necessary for both learner and teacher to feel sure that others (and they) are who they are meant to be. Logging in, in other words, forces us into certain subject positions (Land & Bayne, 2002, online). This becomes highly relevant in terms of online reflective practices, as we will see in Chapter 6 in particular. In the wider internet and the network of blogs (known as the “blogosphere”) in particular, the freedom to experiment with self-disclosure goes hand in hand with the freedom to experiment with identity, or at least with anonymity. To tie the expectation (sometimes the obligation) of disclosure and confession to an authenticated, known self, as teachers do in relation to online reflection, is to enter quite different territory from that of the (perhaps increasingly uncommon) anonymous blogger. The seemingly anarchic spaces of multiplicity Turkle celebrated fifteen years ago have given way to social

networks such as Facebook, to prominent cases of anonymous bloggers being ‘outed’, and to the institutional e-portfolio and virtual learning environment (VLE).

Identity theft (Poster, 2006) and e-safety in schools (Hope, 2005) are two examples of ‘moral panics’ whose solution is seen to be in stringent forms of authentication, where online selves are more and more tightly bound to unique bodies (including fingerprints and iris-scans) offscreen. It is exactly this insistence on authentication, however, that throws into question the agency of the online subject. As Lodders (2008) writes in his review of Poster’s 2006 book *Information Please*, identity is only available for “theft” if it is unhooked from the “corporeal nature of the subject” (p.279). It is here, therefore, that discourses around online subjectivity take a turn towards the textual, through theories of surveillance, the database and the archive.

### **Online subjectivity as textual: surveillance and the database**

A politics that circumscribes freedom around the skin of the individual, labeling everything inside private and untouchable, badly misconceives the present-day situation of digitized, electronic communications. Since our bodies are hooked into the networks, the databases, the information highways, they no longer provide refuge from observation or a bastion around which one can draw a line of resistance. (Poster, 1996, p.291)

Mark Poster (2001) claims that the concept of identity, with its focus on consciousness situated in a body, is useful for exploring political resistance, but that a model of “language/media assemblages” is necessary for thinking about the mutable nature of online subjectivity (p.8). He distinguishes between the phenomenological subject and the online subject, and calls the online domain a “new speech situation” (2006, p.156) requiring new understandings of identities which are partial and paradoxical, in that they appear to be unitary, at least temporarily (p.157). This is a model of online subjectivity as primarily textual, mirroring the replicable, divisible nature of text, and it stands as one kind of example of the post-structuralist fragmentation of the self.

Davies (1997) claims that the post-structuralist subject “is constantly in process; it only exists as process; it is revised and (re)presented through images, metaphors,

storylines and other features of language, such as pronoun grammar; it is spoken and respoken, each speaking existing in a palimpsest with the others” (p.275). Taking up the metaphor of the palimpsest, though, raises the question: is there an essential self (the ‘paper’ foundation of the layered palimpsest) which can be revealed or identified? Or should we ask, with Butler (1993): “what kinds of constructions are foreclosed through the figuring of this site as outside or beneath construction itself?” (p.28). We might think of these closed off constructions as ‘traces’, in the Derridean sense: the (n)ever-present origin (Derrida, 1997, p.61), that which is absent and always already unspeakable when we pretend – for the sake of being able to speak at all – that concepts like ‘self’ are clear.

The unitary, self-aware, individual subject already brought into question by post-structuralist theory is further destabilized by digital representations, which are like liquid: always in motion (editable, non-material), but often leaving permanent traces (archives). In the previous section, I drew attention to the increasing *stability* of authenticated online spaces and the appearance of continuity of identity they provide within their own boundaries and domains. However, the internet is not a single site or space, and each subject will have multiple instances of identity across a variety of spaces. Furthermore, *instability* has been shown to be particularly pronounced within certain kinds of environments on the internet, in what Turkle (1997) describes as a “practice of identity as multiplicity in online life” (p.260). These unauthenticated, perhaps inauthentic, spaces are also of interest to Poster (2006), who describes the “ease of disappearance” within them (p.153).

Beyond even that, though, the archived internet, built on databases, constitutes a form of compulsory memory over which we may have little control: “we do not produce our databased selves, the databased selves produce us” (Simon, 2005, p.16). Poster (1996) argues that databases are a particularly unstable form of interpellation, or ‘hailing’ (p.279). In its construction of subjectivity, the database “refutes the hegemonic principle of the subject as centred, rational and autonomous” (p.286). Each databased self is a textual self which can be replicated, divided, remixed and radically recontextualised: “digital archives allow situational context to collapse with



ease. ...search engines can collapse any data at any period of time” (boyd, 2001, p.33). Poster (1996) puts it starkly: “the database is perfectly transferable in space, indefinitely preservable in time; it may last forever everywhere” (p.284). The instability of human memory has been argued to be a vital part of our sense of self (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009, p.21), and the combination of fragmentation and persistence of the database suggests a radically altered subjectivity.

In its perpetuity, the textual online subject is not a duplicate of the individual, embodied subject. As Graham and Wood point out, the digitally constituted subject(s), or ‘dividuals’, as Deleuze (1992) calls them, may have a social life quite different from the trace or ‘original’ they represent: “these ‘dividuals’ ... are increasingly more important for social identity than bodily selves” (Graham & Wood, 2003, p.231). They can be perfectly visible forever and everywhere; they have no secrets, no autonomy, no right to privacy. Through the participation of consumers or citizens in creating these doubles, they have a status between object and subject, and they can be bought, sold and owned. Databases are what Poster (1996) calls “superpanopticons”, and their prisoners are the disciplined, fragmented textual subjects we create each time we fill in a form or sign up for a web service online (Bayne, 2010, p.9)<sup>9</sup>.

There are two main implications of this argument for education and online reflective practices in particular. One is that, in educational contexts, as Land and Bayne (2002, online) have argued in relation to virtual learning environments, “archival fixity and retrievability” binds students to the words and actions of their online past. It does so without promising to preserve a coherent self, but also without the possibility of deliberate intervention or modification on the part of the student who is ‘represented’. These are representations which are out-of-control; in other words, not representations at all, but versions.

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<sup>9</sup> Bayne argues that these are in fact embodied absences rather than disembodied presences, at least in the case of the icons and images we choose to represent us as visual doubles in various corners of the web.

The other implication is for the important notion of authenticity, which underpins a good deal of reflective practice (see the next part of this chapter, about reflection in higher education). If the digital reflective self generated by online practices is immediately something other than what the student may have intended, questions about authenticity take on an urgent new dimension, and we must consider what exactly we are compelling, and assessing.

Poster, in his most recent book, appears to have moved away somewhat from the implications of a textual online subjectivity. In *Information Please*, he claims that an ethics of the virtual requires something other than an attempt to answer the question “how can identity in cyberspace conform to identity in real life?” (2006, pp.155-6). Rather than consider in ethical terms the language/media assemblages his earlier work suggested, however, he focuses here on an individual ethical obligation to maintain connections and identities (p.153). Acts are moral only when they are freely chosen, and the choice to remain connected is at the heart of Poster’s ethics of the virtual. In framing virtual ethics this way – as a return to the choosing, autonomous selfhood he problematised in his earlier work on the database and authenticated, surveilled and textual selves – he backs away from the moral implications of the textual digital subject.

Lyon (2001) offers a possible way forward in thinking through the ethics of textual subjects – he calls for an ethically motivated and democratically transparent consideration of the categories into which textual, databased selves are sorted and judged. For Lyon, the weight of consequence of this sorting in terms of “life chances and choices” (p.174) for offline selves cannot be undone, but nor should it be disregarded: “because all the justifications of the ‘panoptic sort’ tend to be utilitarian ones, to do with increasing efficiency, or broadening consumer choice, or reducing costs, the need for an ethical approach to counteract it becomes all the more strikingly apparent” (p.177). The database is, in his view, the ultimate technique of normalisation (p.175), and the notion of privacy is inadequate to address it. Lyon’s conclusion, however, returns us to the realm of the embodied individual: the answer to the abstraction of surveillance and digital personae is to insist on the conception of

persons as “embodied – complete with faces” (p.178), and personhood is at the heart of the ethics of surveillance. This, as we have already seen Poster (1996) argue, is to “badly misconceive the present-day situation of digitized, electronic communications” (p.291). Is there, then, a fundamental problem with the application of ‘ethics’ to digital, textual subjects? If so, what implications follow from this?

Perhaps partly with these ethical quagmires in mind, Hayles (2006) warns against too fragmented and textual a construction of the posthuman, noting that the subject “construed as an informational pattern that happens to be instantiated in a biological substrate” is “nefarious” (p.160), and calling instead for a “relational and distributed” (p.161) understanding of the posthuman subject – what could perhaps be termed relational posthumanism. Poster (2006) describes a construct he names the ‘humachine’<sup>10</sup> (p.36), which he does not specify in detail, but which has echoes of what Hayles calls the “cognisphere”, to which I turn next.

### **Online subjectivity as hybrids and networks: the cognisphere and Actor Network Theory**

In their paper on the ethics of internet research, Bassett and O’Riordan (2002) argue that the common conception of the web as spatial contributes to a mistaken conflation of body and data, and a consequent confusion about whether internet research should take a ‘human subjects’ or documentary analysis approach. For them, what is needed is “a hybrid model of relational ethics that incorporates text, space and bodies” (p.245). Hayles points the way to such a model in her conception of the “cognisphere”.

Hayles (2006) says that the individual person (or cyborg) is not sufficiently networked a concept to be an “appropriate unit of analysis” (p.160). However, she retains a strong focus on cognition and agency, claiming that this is “embodied

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<sup>10</sup> The term ‘humachine’ appears to have been coined by Luke, and is described as “machinic ensembles of power, space, production, energy, reproduction, matter, organization, and information with their own intelligence and agency that coconstitute the operational settings and sustainable life worlds of cyborg life-forms” (Luke, 1997, p.1370).

throughout human flesh *and* extended into the social and technological environment” (p.161, emphasis mine). For Hayles, systems and embodied humans are linked in a network of “globally interconnected cognitive systems”: what she calls (following Whalen) the cognisphere (*ibid*).

As a model of networked and relational subjectivity, the cognisphere acknowledges its relation to the human body primarily through the discourse of cognitive science, which offers explanations for “the physical and psychological bases for human constructions of reality” (Hayles, 2006, p.163). However, presenting the body as essentially fuel for the mind does not seem to address concerns relating to the social consequences of being or having a body that is interpretable, trackable and implicated in the ways in which we are known and constructed as subjects. In other words, the cognisphere embraces the networked nature of online subjectivity at the expense of engaging deeply with either the situated body or the fragmented code. It also seems to risk falling into the same “Cartesian” trap that Hayles herself (1999) critiques in relation to posthuman theory, which is that it privileges cognition over embodiment: “to the extent that the posthuman constructs embodiment as the instantiation of thought/information, it continues the liberal tradition rather than disrupts it” (p.5). This is, in Suchman’s (2007) words, a deadening rather than an enlivening approach that comes from: “an investment in obscuring the performative foundations of persons and things” (p.256).

An alternative angle from which to approach the idea of hybrid online subjectivity is through the lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Law (2004) describes ANT as an analytic approach that “treats entities and materialities as enacted and relational effects” rather than as natural categories (p.157). Such an approach allows us to move away from the text/body dichotomy, to consider agency and subjectivity as a shifting set of relations. Hand and Sandywell (2002) write that “‘online’ subjectivity... emerges through an open constellation of human agency, keyboard, monitor, fibre-optics, microprocessor, electronic text, network infrastructure, intelligent recipients and so on” (p.209). They offer the metaphor of “technopoiesis”: “world-making characteristics of technologies-in-practice” (p.213). ANT posits that

networks and flows circulate through practices, and actions and desires emerge through the “translations that are negotiated through ...movements, talk, materials, emotions and discourses” (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p.21). This is a different construction of subjectivity from that of the cognisphere; it proposes that, rather than human minds being part of a network (digital or otherwise), the network is what constitutes subjectivity. As with the cognisphere, the subject/object distinction is problematised, but in a way which does not easily map to a neo-Cartesian privileging of ‘information’ above all else. In fact, the ANT model aligns closely with a Foucauldian perspective on subjectivity as constantly in process and being produced by discourse.

Models of subjectivity that address hybridity, as the cognisphere and ANT do, provide another piece of the puzzle of what it means to *be* online. What becomes evident when talking about subjectivity in this way is that almost nowhere in the e-learning literature does it rear its head. Educators, educational developers and learning technologists long for digital enhancement, but they shy away from transformation. Disruptive voices, such as Bayne’s (2010), are beginning to emerge and, as she suggests, the teaching practices or “generative digital pedagogies” (p.11) which follow from them will look, and be, quite different. The riskiness of taking up these generative pedagogies, and of engaging openly with hybridity and the instability of ‘selfhood’ both on- and offline, is that the project of education is part of a “grand narrative of progress” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p.172) whose object is the autonomous, developing individual. Questioning the nature of the ‘subject’ problematises the whole humanist enterprise, and we are left to rethink what education might mean (Edwards, 2010). Of course *that* rethinking has long been going on in certain domains, in largely theoretical terms, but learning online, if we let it, brings teachers and students face-to-face with the destabilising force of digital subjectivity.

### **Summing up the online subject?**

There are political reasons for wanting to preserve a place for the body and the individual online: because it is a domain where “writing and reading otherness”

(Nakamura, 2000, p.712) takes on a heightened significance, and otherness, with its possibilities and problems, is a crucial part of the fabric of online life. There are also political reasons for wanting to draw attention to the superpanopticon that duplicates and manipulates its digital subjects, creating, maintaining and profiting from uncanny textual simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994a; Bayne, 2010). In a sense the former connects us with the past, and with a tradition of scholarship and activism which takes as its unit of analysis the socially situated individual. In this tradition, travelling into online territory does not fundamentally alter the rules of the game (quite the opposite, in fact). The latter, textual account asks us to think ourselves anew and look at radically altered forms not just of representation but of subjectivity itself.

Poster says that agency was a model developed for modern societies, but that postmodern society requires another model. He asks: “what kind of agency does that require? What kind of subject-positions are most conducive to building a postmodern, global society?” (Murray, 2003, p.3). The question is still open, but it is apparent that we require a way of thinking at the same time about networks of relations, embodied selves and fragmented assemblages of language and code. The cognisphere appeals because it seems to promise to attend to these strands by combining them into a larger whole, but not in a rich enough way to allow us to abandon the debate. An ANT approach offers a generative way of thinking that would seem to be equal to the task of theorising the uncertain, unstable, fuzzy ontological boundaries of subjectivity online.

Education is a set of practices with unstable boundaries: “No matter how much education is pursued as a centred project... something always escapes. The attempt to make education into a controlled and controlling project is never total, that which eludes the totalising grasp always makes education ultimately uncontrollable” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p.141). Similarly, when we turn to look at one aspect of online subjectivity, another slips away. What is important in the not-knowing, though, is to remain open to what does not fit or make sense yet. In particular, I have paid attention to how subjectivity is framed in the accounts of my project participants, and how this affects their framing of online reflection. My goal is to understand the sense

people make of their practices, and so understanding the sense they make of themselves in the online context is therefore an important part of this project.

## **Reflective practices and writing in higher education**

This penultimate part of this chapter has two main aims. The first is to show how the key concerns and issues relating to reflection and reflective writing in higher education point to reflection as being above all concerned with individual experience and progress. This is the ground on which reflective writing is justified as a meaningful measure or process of learning, even when it is compulsory, audience-focused or otherwise high-stakes. A pervasive humanist narrative of a true self which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing about thoughts and experiences is by and large taken for granted in literature that presumes autonomous selfhood, rationality and progress as the natural goals of deep or authentic learning. As Usher and Edwards (1994) have argued about student-centred learning more generally, reflective practices are “ultimately circumscribed by [their] humanist presuppositions” (p.114).

The second aim is to draw attention to the literature which problematises the mostly unspoken assumptions that underpin reflective practice and offers alternative theoretical perspectives. This small body of writing has not been widely cited, and has not been recognised at all in the literature on online reflection (which is discussed in the final part of this chapter). Partly this may be due to its oppositional stance and the inability of more mainstream theories, with their emphasis on supporting and promoting reflection, to take account of it. Partly, though, it would seem to suffer from a lack of coherence and momentum. A number of papers have described similar theoretical perspectives and identified similar problems without making reference to one other – sometimes because these papers are emerging in different disciplinary contexts (nursing and teaching are especially prevalent) and are not making connections with similar literature in other fields. So I aim to pull this literature together and provide other researchers with a starting point for their explorations of alternatives to humanist models of reflection in higher education.

I have not focused in detail on the significant number of books and articles offering models or practical strategies for supporting reflection, except where this also adds new theoretical perspectives or important insights (Moon, 1999a). This aspect of the literature, and the accounts of practice that make up the bulk of published material on reflection (and online reflection, as we will see), rely on the same underpinning assumptions. I have paid particular attention to the issue of assessment and how this does, or does not, problematise assumptions about reflection. I have left a discussion of the literature on online reflective practices for the following section of this chapter.

### **Reflection, individual experience, and progress**

There is general agreement in the literature on reflection and learning that ‘reflection’ itself is a contested and sometimes confusing term. For Boud (2006), one key problem with reflection in higher education is that teachers come to it with a range of ideas of what it means. He identifies three key conceptions at work: technical/instrumental, interpretive/constructivist and critical (p.3). Fendler (2003) makes a related argument, taking a historical perspective and identifying an “array of meanings” informing reflective practices in teacher education: Cartesian rationality; Dewey’s notion of self discipline; Schön’s flexible “reflection-in-action” and feminist claims of empowerment and agency through self-knowledge. She concludes that “reflective teaching has become a catchall term for competing programs... It is no wonder then that current research and practices relating to reflection tend to embody mixed messages and confusing agendas” (p.20).

In contrast, Rogers (2001) analysed seven theories of reflection (including Dewey; Schön; and Boud, Keogh and Walker) and found some commonality in terms of definitions: he maintains that there is broad agreement that reflection is a cognitive activity or process which requires the individual’s active engagement to examine his or her own emotional or cognitive responses to situations or experiences. The overall purpose of reflection is to improve the individual’s effectiveness (p.41). Moon (1999b) identifies slightly different theoretical sources of reflective practices (primarily Dewey and Habermas, with important contributions from Schön and



Kolb), but also sees reflection as essentially an unproblematic concept. She maintains that alternative perspectives are merely “frameworks of meaning” imposed on the “simple mental process” that is reflection (p.93): a purposeful consideration of complex or open ended problems or ideas, or what she calls an “input-process-outcome model” (p.98). She is concerned with defining reflection as simply and broadly as possible so that it may more effectively be taught and empirically researched, and to counter the tendency for untested theories to be solidified into unquestioningly accepted tenets of reflection. For Moon, important questions remain about the relationship of emotion and reflection, for example (p.95), but her simple definition is sufficient, she believes, to allow teaching, practice and research to productively go forward.

There is a danger in what both Rogers and Moon are attempting that a definition of reflection, once simplified, becomes so broad that it is no longer helpful in thinking about the sorts of issues that more specific perspectives bring to the fore. However, while I think Moon in particular oversimplifies the matter, giving less importance to those diverse “frameworks of meaning” than they should have, I share her belief that there is common territory for the various conceptions of reflection. The foundation of reflection, which is often relied upon without being explicitly recognised, is a certain kind of assumption about the self doing the reflecting: it is individual, autonomous, consistent, but most of all amenable to development and progression through effort and direction. In other words, reflection relies on a humanist self (Fenwick, 2000, p.248). For this reason, as we will see, it richly rewards a post-structuralist analysis which views reflection as a discursive shaping of subjectivity. For the same reason, however, such analysis is not really welcome, and the vast majority of published work on reflection – despite its apparent proliferation of meanings – shares a common and unquestioned ontological foundation. The following accounts draw out some of what this humanist foundation entails, through the lenses of linearity, authenticity and empowerment.

*Purpose, direction and reflection*

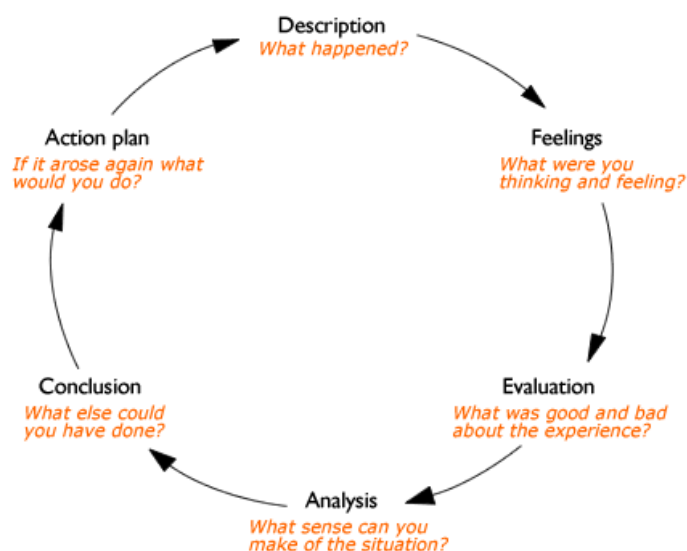
John Dewey is often identified as the fore-father of reflective practices in higher education today: according to Moon (1999b), his theories of thinking and education in the 1933 book *How We Think* have been highly influential in subsequent theories and models which justify making reflection part of higher education curricula in many disciplines. Dewey (1933) considers reflective thinking to be quite different from other kinds of mental processes, which he identifies as stream-of-consciousness, invention and belief. Reflective thinking relies on logic, evidence, discipline and purposefulness. Through reflection, a state of doubt resolves into a settled truth or course of action (p.12). Both the doubt and the resolution are integral to reflective thinking. English (2007) refers to this doubt or uncertainty as the “negativity of experience”, by which she means the productively unexpected, or “the space between old and new experiences” (p.136). Or, as Dewey (1933) puts it, “the old, the near, the accustomed, is not that *to* which but that *with* which we attend” (p.290). Importantly, doubt must be genuine and experienced by the individual: “general appeals to a child (or to a grown-up) to think, irrespective of the existence in his own experience of some difficulty that troubles him... [are] futile” (p.15), and teachers should “know” their students in order to understand what will energise them to think reflectively (p.36). Reflective thinking requires open-mindedness and curiosity, whole-heartedness and a sense of responsibility, all of which must be nurtured. To teach reflective thought is to empower students to act, give them the means of control over their circumstances, and to enrich the experience of life. Dewey says little about assessment here, but he criticises the imposition of “external standards”, arguing that these are applicable only to knowledge of subject matter, not to the training of the mind which he advocates (p.65). Reflective thinking is “thinking as an art”, and art requires discipline, which is not, in Dewey’s view, in conflict with freedom (pp.85-7).

Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) and Moon (1999a, 1999b) make less clear-cut arguments about the purposefulness of reflection. Both indicate that reflection is in some sense a natural and inevitable function, and ‘ubiquitous’ in its relationship with learning (Moon, 1999a, p.24) but maintain also that, as Boud et al put it, “the

adoption of a reflective approach [to learning] is a choice that we can make or not as we wish” (1985, p.24). Both draw on the twin concepts of deep and surface learning (Boud et al., 1985, p.24; Moon, 1999a, p.26), and associate reflection with deep and even ‘transformative’ levels of learning, arguing that reflection is not present, or at least not purposefully *used*, at lower or surface levels of learning (Moon, 1999b, p.149). I conclude from this that both Boud et al and Moon basically concur with Dewey that reflection is set apart (at least in part) by its purposefulness.

One notable feature of the most commonly used models of reflection is their linearity. With individual experience as their starting point, the models posit ideal stages of progress through which a learner should pass on their way to the end point, which is either an understanding of how a situation could have been approached better, or another experience, in which case the cycle starts again. Even where the process is visually represented as circular (Gibbs, 1988), it is uni-directional: the ideal form of reflective thought according to these models takes experience as the raw material from which value and insight is derived:

#### *Representation of the Gibbs cycle of reflection<sup>11</sup>*



<sup>11</sup> Source: [http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/upgrade/a-z/reflective\\_gibbs.html](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/upgrade/a-z/reflective_gibbs.html) . Retrieved 26/7/2011.

The linearity of these models suggests a logical mind which can process experiences in ways that it chooses, for its own (or others') purposes.

### *Experience, emotion and embodiment*

In general, discourses of reflection make an assumption about the nature of experience which locates it as personal and private. Boud et al (1985) define reflection as “working with experience” (p.19). In separating experience from reflection, they situate the latter in the realm of the individual mind, and equate deliberate learning with the capture and analysis of experience. Unlike Dewey (1933), they make claims for the role of emotion in this process, but primarily in the sense that negative and positive emotional associations with topics and environments will affect the mind's ability to work with an experience. Negative emotions, in particular, can block the efficacy of learning, and part of the reflective process is to remove these “obstructing feelings”, which are “impediments to a thorough examination of the experience” (p.26). They also maintain a role for emotion in the “triggering incidents” which spark reflection (p.46). These are understandings of reflection as rational detachment, in which a stripping away of extraneous thought or emotion enables an individual to learn from the experiences they have had. This position is similar to that of Brockbank and McGill (1998), who discuss critical reflection as a process of detachment (p.58).

Other authors propose a greater role for emotion in reflection, while preserving an emphasis on individual experience. Ghaye (2007), in an editorial for the journal *Reflective Practice*, asks a series of provocative questions about the ethics of reflective practice, many of which revolve around an understanding of what he describes as the personal, private, particular views of students (pp.157-8). He asks teachers and researchers to take account of the emotions that are described and produced by reflective practices, and to pay attention to principles of fidelity, gratitude, nonmaleficence, beneficence and autonomy in their dealings with students around reflection. Other authors situate emotion even more centrally in reflection. Bleakley (1999), for example, insists that “reflection needs body, passion, sensitivity

to context, and, above all, begs for style... it is not a cold, detached and disembodied rationalising” (p. 319).

Pollard (2008), responding to Ghaye, problematises this focus on experience as private and personal, which leads to confessional modes of writing. She proposes an alternative, which is to view experience as a “conversation between the self and that which is not yet known” (p.402). She describes experience as starting “with an encounter with strangeness” (*ibid*). This strangeness can come in the form of any “event which forcibly interrupts stable truths and forces changes to habits” (p.403), including, she seems to suggest, the figure of the teacher as “strange intruder” (p.406).

Even where emotion, instinct and artistry are called into play as important aspects of the reflective process, ultimately what is usually valued is the rational mind, which “is considered to be the most natural, innate characteristic of ‘man’” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p.136), and which can *make sense of* that emotion. Michelson (1996) discusses this at length, arguing that both liberal humanist and emancipatory traditions of adult learning see experience “as insufficient in its own terms; both schools assume, and, to a certain degree, construct, specific algorithms for how reflection transforms experience into something beyond itself” (p.439). She focuses on the gendered nature of both “experience” and “reason”, noting that “experience, like the female, is the ‘author’less body waiting to be acted upon by the mind, which alone can bestow order and meaning” (p.443), and calls for recognition of ways of knowing that flow from emotion, the body, intuition and personal history (p.445).

Pollard’s and Michelson’s papers are useful and engaging critiques of assumptions about experience and reason, but they leave largely untouched other humanist ideals, those to do with authenticity and the knowable self, and the role of reflection in ‘revealing’ (through emotion, through encounters with strangeness, or through reason) the truth of the self.

*Authenticity, knowing and being known through reflection*

The linked themes of self-knowledge and being knowable are central to several important accounts of reflection. Johns (2004) and Bolton (2005) write primarily about the use of reflection in professional practice and clinical supervision. Their writing therefore pays relatively little attention to the special contexts of reflection in higher education, particularly issues of assessment. Nevertheless, their recent work is relevant to the study at hand because they articulate with great clarity the sense in which reflection constitutes and reveals a knowable self. In addition, both writers are frequently cited in literature focusing on reflection in professional education contexts.

Johns' (2004) work on reflection is primarily aimed at helping health professionals to be emotionally available and stable in work situations which can be harrowing and extreme. For him, self-knowledge is at the heart of this stability: "if you consider that 'who I am' is the major therapeutic tool I use in my practice, then clearly I need to know myself well in order to use myself in the best therapeutic way" (p.37). Evidently there is for Johns a very fine line between self-knowledge and self-management. This management should involve receiving help from a trusted other in exploring our 'defended depths" (*ibid*). Unlike Moon and others, as we will see, Johns makes relatively little distinction between writing reflectively and sharing stories verbally in a real-time encounter with another person: they are equivalent forms of emotional expression (p.39). Johns argues that self-disclosure has proven benefits in terms of both mental and physical health. Telling stories about ourselves, in other words, is good for us. Reflection can, furthermore, be a route towards uncovering the "truth" of situations which we have distorted through flawed patterns of thinking (p.76).

Bolton (2005) is inclined to view reflection not so explicitly as a tool for self-management, but rather one for profound self-exposure and examination: "a closely observed event... written about, reflected upon, discussed critically, and re-explored through further writings stands metonymically for the whole of that professional's practice" (p.31). Individual change and development over time can be "kept pace

with” by a reflective practice that focuses on a “practitioner’s relationship with her- or himself” (p.22).

Boud (2001) claims that reflection on practice allows for a re-evaluation of experience to determine which thoughts and feelings resulting from it are authentic (p.14). Like ‘reflection’ itself, authenticity in learning generally is a complex and contested concept (Kreber, Klampfleitner, McCune, Bayne, & Knottenbelt, 2007). Most authors writing about reflection appear to define authenticity in the Heideggerian sense of ‘ownness’ or ‘mineness’ – an unmediated orientation to the self (Carman, 2009). In this sense, authenticity is a key feature of the self-knowledge that Bolton and Johns advocate. Fendler (2003) associates the call for authenticity with a feminist approach in which “reflection is constructed as a way of getting in touch with one’s authentic inner self in order to think in ways that have not been influenced by the same theoretical tools that built the master’s house” (pp.19-20), and problematises this from a Foucauldian perspective, which I will discuss later. The notion that reflection has the power to *see through* assumptions and falsehoods is one taken up strongly by proponents of critical reflection.

Educators and researchers in the critical tradition argue that only reflection whose purpose is to “expose or unsettle dominant assumptions with the expressed purpose of challenging and changing dominant power relations” (Fook & Askeland, 2006, p.47) can be called critical reflection. Mezirow (1997), one of the key proponents of critical reflection, extols the virtues of critical reflection for transforming frames of reference, which involves exploring not only the assumptions of others, but also self-assumptions (p.7). This form of reflective practice takes its name from critical theory, and describes an ideology rather than a method. Not all authors use the term in this way, however. Barnett (1997) writes about ‘critical self-reflection’ as an emancipatory but essentially apolitical independence of thought and action. He argues that higher education does a poor job of fostering this critical self-reflection, instead focusing on superficial and instrumental forms of reflection which orient the student’s self towards external agendas (p.100), rather than challenging and destabilising it in the service of a deeper and more personal understanding and

action. Barnett's vision is less prescriptive than the critical theorists', but also less attuned to the contexts in which individuals can act. However, both of these forms of critical reflection require a subject who is willing and able to challenge convention and their own comfortable truths, and, as I have already discussed, to evidence progress and change: "to classify a piece of writing as showing critical reflection, there should be evidence of a change in perspective over a fundamental belief" (Kember, McKay, Sinclair, & Wong, 2008, p.375).

Having briefly explored some of the underpinning assumptions about reflection, I now move on to discuss what is specific about reflective *writing*, and further, how it is justified as a valid mode of assessment in higher education.

### **Reflective writing and assessment**

Schön's theory of reflective practice has been extremely influential in professional disciplines in higher education. His focus is on improving practice, and his instrument for doing so is the decision-making of practitioners. Schön (1991) argues that professionals work in conditions of uncertainty, and must hone the ability to "reflect-in-action": to draw flexibly on past experience while taking account of new factors and conditions, all while in the midst or flow of a situation. He maintains that in supporting reflective practice, educators must be competent professionals themselves who can articulate their own processes in ways that are transparent for students (Schön, 1987). Van Manen (1995) is doubtful about the extent to which reflection-in-action can be articulated, let alone taught, as it is so embodied, tacit and instinctual. Ixer (1999) maintains that only if 'action' is slowed down dramatically, or stopped entirely, can what happens within it be considered reflection, and he therefore questions the premise of reflection-in-action.

In any case, it is "reflection-on-action" – Schön's contrasting form of reflection – that formal reflective writing aims to foster. Reflection-on-action involves time, dialogue and in-depth exploration after an event, and it sets the practitioner up for improved reflection-in-action the next time a novel situation emerges. This reflection-on-action is thought to be amenable to being captured in written form.



Moon (1999a) argues that reflective writing has metacognitive benefits (p. 27): writing expresses understanding and captures ideas for later consideration (p.31). Creme (2005) contrasts reflective learning journal writing with traditional academic essay writing and concludes that “whereas the subject matter of an essay normally comprises ideas and information ‘out there’, learning journals also encompass the student–writer: they are about ‘you-plus-course material’” (p.288). What is personal becomes, through the process of reflective writing, fused with other materials of learning in ways which allow for independence and creative exploration (p.289). Time is also positively associated with successful and meaningful reflection (Clegg & Bufton, 2008), and writing is seen as slowing thinking down (Moon, 1999a, p.31) in beneficial ways, creating “intellectual space for learners” (p.79). The question of time will be more fully explored in Chapter 9.

One challenging aspect of reflective writing as it is discussed in some key texts is the extent to which writing creates, rather than represents, experience. Moon (1999a), in her book about learning journals, argues that informal or expressive writing is a direct means of learning and sense-making (pp.29-30). Richardson’s (1994) work on writing as a method of inquiry emerges as important in reflective practices, and both Moon and Bolton cite her. The key argument here is that writing does more than capture thoughts, it is constitutive of reality (Bolton, 2005, p.46). Reflective writing, then, can be seen as *structuring* experience in powerful ways. I will return to consider the extent to which this complicates other arguments about the role of reflection in capturing or processing experience in Chapters 6 and 8.

On a practical level, a written record is a form of evidence of reflection (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Ho & Richards, 1993) which thinking alone does not produce, and this evidence can be stored, worked with and evaluated. At the same time, writing is thought to open reflection up to what Boud (2001) calls the “inhibiting gaze of others” (p.15). Boud claims that the possibility (let alone the reality) of audience can be constraining, particularly when the audience may wield the power of assessment. Conversely, Brockbank and McGill (1998) highlight the importance of “intentional reflective dialogue” in the reflective process, arguing that it supports a necessary

process of detached observation and change of parts of the self (pp.57-61). They do not appear to distinguish between dialogue amongst students and dialogue between a student and tutor, nor between written or spoken dialogue. However, the notion that reflection requires another or others to be maximally effective would seem to support the use of reflective *writing*, with its implicit or explicit audience.

There is relatively little in the theoretical literature to support the assessment of reflection. Creme (2005) makes one strong argument in its favour: doing so attests to the value that teachers may wish to give more personal and process-orientated forms of knowledge construction. Assessment motivates students by recognising the effort that they put in to producing these texts (p.289). Bolton (2005) seems to suggest that, given enough clarity in assessment criteria, reflection can successfully be assessed (p.133). This position is also taken by English (2001), who describes clear guidelines as the basis for ethical assessment of reflection (p.31).

Other authors are more concerned about validity than ethics in the assessment of reflection. Positions vary considerably on this point, with authors such as Ixer (1999) returning to the notion that the concept of reflection lacks clarity, and that “we do not know enough about reflection or how its intricate and complex cognitive processes can enhance learning to be able to assess it fairly” (p.520). Dymont and O’Connell (2011), in a recent paper analysing the reported quality of reflection in 11 studies in higher education, highlight the extreme variation in methods of assessing reflection and in the reported quality of reflection itself, and recommend that the “academic community” consider adopting a standard approach to assessment of reflection for both research and teaching purposes (p.92). Tummons (2011) maintains that there can be no such detached “clarity” in reflection, and that validity must necessarily involve local, partial social and literacy practices which are “fuzzy and complex”, and assessment criteria need (somehow) to take account of this (p.481). Brockbank and McGill (1998) argue that problems of bias and reliability in assessing reflection can be solved by ‘triangulation’ – where students’ reflective reports are supplemented by peer and tutor reports or dialogues (pp.100-4).

Still others are not convinced that reflection can or should be assessed at all. Creme (2005) problematises the assessment of reflection on the grounds that it kills off the very qualities that reflection is intended to foster (p.291). She suggests that reflective writing is valuable only to the extent that it frees the writer up to experiment with self-construction, and that these experiments deserve an interested, empathetic and most importantly non-judgemental reader (p.294). Reflective writing may therefore be usefully engaged with in higher education through formative *feedback*, but not through summative (or even formative) *assessment*. Boud and Walker (1998) argue that the combination of asking students to be vulnerable *and* assessing them within the same task undermines reflection and promotes self-censorship. They claim that “students expect to write for assessment what they know, not reveal what they don’t know” (p.194). In a later article, Boud (2001) rejects outright the notion that reflective journals should be directly assessed, warning of the “powerful influence” assessment has “on what is produced and the extent to which writers can engage in critical reflection” (p.17), a view he echoes in 2006, when he calls the marking of raw reflective journals “inappropriate” (2006, p.3).

Creme (2005) and Boud (2006) argue that formal assignments *based on* reflective writing can be summatively assessed to good effect, striking an acceptable balance between valuing the process and concept of reflection while separating it somewhat from academic judgement. Brockbank and McGill (1998), too, recommend creating some deliberate distance between the process-driven and private reflective writing which forms the basis of these reports, and the selective public portfolios which are to be assessed (pp.100-4). This compromise is seen to be less than ideal, however, as Creme (2005) points out that it implies that reflection is not valuable for its own sake (p.291).

If there is little enthusiasm in the literature for assessing reflection, why, in practice, is it being assessed? In addition to Creme’s argument about giving credit for what is valued, practical issues of time and motivation would seem to be paramount: there is a perception amongst practitioners that they cannot afford the time for, and students will not voluntarily participate in, activities which do not ‘count’ (Tosh et al., 2005).

The answer may also lie in part in the increasing popularity of e-portfolios, which have their own history and traditions, as a means of capturing reflection, and I will explore this further in the final part of this chapter which addresses online reflection.

### **Challenging humanist assumptions in reflection**

The humanist assumptions justifying reflective practices in higher education have been identified and critiqued on a number of theoretical and pedagogical grounds in recent years, and a small number of authors have proposed post-structuralist, and specifically Foucauldian, ways of looking differently at reflection. These different perspectives take into account the non-transparency of language, the governmentality of surveillance and confession, and the instrumentalism of discourses of development. The literature discussed in this section is a key resource in the construction of my own theoretical perspectives on reflection, and will be drawn on again in subsequent chapters.

Fendler's (2003) analysis of the various meanings of reflection ultimately ties reflective practices to Foucauldian neo-liberal governmentality, where governing power is de-centred and located within individuals, who become responsible for their own surveillance (Lemke, 2001). Closely aligned with neo-liberal governmentality is the equation of reflection with the confessional. Gilbert's (2001) critique of clinical supervision in nursing, and the subsequent response offered by Clouder and Sellars (2004), are valuable for the clarity with which they set out the arguments around confession and surveillance in reflective practice. Gilbert maintains that it is disingenuous to speak of autonomous, pure, critical selves emerging from practices which demand confession and discipline experience. Clouder and Sellars respond by suggesting that surveillance is ubiquitous for practitioners in almost all facets of their work, and that more, rather than fewer, forms of surveillance which make themselves visible and contestable, are beneficial: "surveillance becomes more ethical if it is made explicit rather than implicit by developing reflective practice, for instance, through clinical supervision" (p.262). This ignores, however, the constitutive nature of surveillance, which was discussed in the first part of this chapter. This is an aspect of what Smyth (1992) refers to as the "politics of reflection".

The politics of reflection is also the politics of individualism, which “dismantles questions of politics, of discipline, of institutional interaction and of the workings of social categories by reducing them to questions of ‘thinking’” (Erlandson, 2005, p.669). In her work on personal development planning (PDP) and progress files in higher education, Clegg (2004) criticises the instrumentalism and individualism of reflection as it has come to be understood: “we are being exhorted to persuade our students that it is their own individual capacities that will be decisive in their future career success and that these can be enhanced through reflection” (p.295). Discourses of reflection depend to a great extent on notions of individualism and emancipatory liberal humanism (Bleakley, 1999). Despite the fact that these notions have been deeply problematised in the “poststructuralist turn” in the social sciences in particular (Davies & Davies, 2007), Clegg (2004) argues that teachers in higher education are invited to accept them as “obvious and transparent” (p.293) when it comes to PDP and reflection.

Furthermore, contrary to an emancipatory rhetoric of reflection, high-stakes reflection is always inscribed with ‘correct’ answers. Hargreaves (2004) argues that compulsory reflective practices are essentially narrative in character, and that: “in producing narratives for assessment students are being asked to produce a story, and... in nursing (and possibly other professional settings) only three ‘stories’ are legitimate” (p.199). She identifies these as ‘valedictory’, ‘condemnatory’ and ‘redemptive’ narratives (p.200). In constructing a narrative for the purposes of assessment the successful student understands which kinds of stories are legitimate, and shapes his or her words accordingly. Macfarlane and Gourlay (2009) invoke a “‘hidden curriculum’ of emotional performativity” in reflective writing (p.455) which requires students to humbly admit to their weaknesses, demonstrate that they have changed, and refrain from questioning current theoretically fashionable positions. For these reasons, Fendler (2003) categorizes reflective journal writing as a site of “surveillance and an exercise of pastoral power” (p.22). The normativity of reflection is discussed in Chapter 7.

The deliberate strategies called for by reflection are just part of the picture, though. In their analysis of the rhetorical strategies of professional development, Edwards and Nicoll (2006) argue that models, theories and so-called common-sense understandings of reflection often ignore the “intertextual and interdiscursive practices that make it possible” (p.123). Like me, Edwards and Nicoll object to the notion of reflection as a mirror, instead proposing to view it as a “language game” that privileges the idea of language as transparent (*ibid*). As I will argue, language is far from transparent, working to construct the selves it purports to disclose through reflection. Devas (2004), looking in detail at a student learning questionnaire, identifies within its questions and structure a clear inscription of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ answers (p.36). She argues that the student respondents to the survey must speak a truth “circumscribed... by the power of the authority to which they are confessing” (p.39), and that they are “summoned into being” as a certain discursively constructed form of ‘student’ (p.41). The implications of this way of thinking about reflection – as producing the history and the reality they represent – are, as Taylor (2003) argues, rarely acknowledged (p.249). To do so would be to undermine the foundations of reflective practice and call into question the justification for compelling and assessing reflection.

If these critiques are seldom addressed in the literature on reflection and higher education, they are even less frequently drawn on in work that specifically considers online reflection. In the final part of this chapter, I review the literature on online reflective writing, e-portfolios and blogs, indicating where my research contributes to understandings of high-stakes online reflective practices in higher education.

## **Online reflective writing in weblogs and e-portfolios**

At the time of writing, online reflective writing in higher education tends to be supported through the use of blogs or e-portfolios. Blogs are reverse-chronologically organised, primarily textual, web-based spaces for writing, while e-portfolios are often characterised by their multiple features and purposes. The core feature of an e-

portfolio is the ability to collect, organise and share ‘evidence’ of some kind: of learning, personal development, professional and academic competence, or all three.

Most e-portfolios are highly structured, database- and template-driven. Where present in an e-portfolio, reflective writing is typically either attached as metadata to artefacts; treated as an artefact itself, to be mixed and matched with other evidence (Strivens, 2007, p.13); or the ‘glue’ or narrative holding the portfolio together. Different contexts of use produce very different sorts of orientations to reflection; and indeed, not all uses of e-portfolios aim to be reflective. Perhaps as a result, reflection is, in the context of much educational literature on e-portfolios, seen as one of a multitude of options to be selected (or not) when using these technologies. In other words: reflection moves from being a complex site of attention and practice in its own right, as we saw in the previous part of this chapter, to being a technological feature or affordance.

A blog can either stand alone or be part of e-portfolios or VLEs. Its purpose is most commonly understood as reflective: because of its chronological way of displaying data, a blog is ideally suited for the linear, developmental model so prevalent in educational reflective practices.

The literature on reflection in e-portfolios makes different sorts of claims from that on educational blogging, and I will discuss the two separately. It is worth saying, however, that the vast majority of educational literature on both blogs and e-portfolios is written from the point of view of learning technologists or teachers, and is descriptive of particular tools or of particular examples of practice; what Hounsell et al (2007) call “accounts of practice”. In addition, it mostly uncritically accepts these tools and practices as beneficial above and beyond offline practices, in terms of efficiency, accessibility, relevance, the enhancement of technical skills, and in terms of the ease of finding an audience and fostering community and dialogue. Where drawbacks are identified, these are usually attributed to lack of motivation, understanding or technical proficiency on the part of students or teachers, lack of institutional understanding or support, concerns about privacy and safety in the

online environment, or sometimes a lack of time or resource to properly implement these otherwise promising technologies.

Furthermore, though reflection is very often cited as a key benefit of blogs and e-portfolios, literature which focuses on online reflection is relatively rare. For most authors, any questions about the nature or purpose of reflection appear to have been answered in advance, and there is no need to do more than vaguely invoke 'reflection' to do the work of justifying the use of blogs and e-portfolios, without engaging with the debates around reflection, audience, or authenticity raised in the previous section, let alone how these debates might change as a result of moving reflection online.

There is also very little in the way of literature which engages with the online subject. Online reflective accounts are assumed to have a straightforward relationship with the offline selves of students, and few authors writing about online reflection ask what it means to create digital-textual selves or what impact reflecting online has on the subjectivity of students and teachers.

A key purpose of this section is therefore to set the small body of work which *does* critically engage with online reflection and the online subject, and to which I will return throughout this thesis, in the wider context of an overwhelming lack of criticality, lack of concern about the nature of reflective practices in education, and apparent lack of curiosity about what difference being online makes.

Where digital difference is acknowledged in online reflective practices, it is seen to be technological rather than conceptual, and beneficial rather than problematic (P. Butler, 2006, p.12). The following table outlines the features usually positively associated with online reflection, as compared with paper-based methods:



*Discourses of online and paper-based reflection*

<b>Online (the new)</b>	<b>Paper-based (the old)</b>
efficient	time consuming
convenient	inconvenient
accessible	remote
relevant	outmoded
flexible	constraining
multi-modal	textual
audience focused	solitary
spontaneous	deliberate

The other key purpose of this section is to describe and explore the treatment of matters of assessment in relation to online reflection, and to argue that much of the apprehension or outright disapproval of assessing reflection expressed in the theoretical literature discussed in the last section evaporates when it comes to reflective writing online. I believe there are two reasons for this. The first is that assessability is held up as the ultimate goal of e-portfolio use in higher education, and insofar as reflection is part of e-portfolios, it is considered fair game. Secondly, the communicative, dialogic possibilities of online writing in general, and cultural understandings of blogging in particular, have prompted a shift from viewing reflection as personal and private to audience-focused and public.

**E-portfolios: evidence, representation and assessment**

E-portfolios, like paper-based portfolios before them, are widely believed to support ‘authentic assessment’ (Cambridge, 2010, p.88; Kimball, 2005, p.435) and ‘constructive alignment’ (Clark & Adamson, 2009). The perceived combination of personalisation, reflection, evidence, and supervision or tracking makes an online portfolio appear extremely well-suited to assessment in a variety of subjects and disciplines, especially those with significant practice elements (Strivens, 2007, p.5). There are also a number of professions and professional bodies which make

membership or progression contingent on evidence of reflective practice, and here e-portfolios are seen to be a convenient method of collecting and storing this evidence.

This combination of traits and uses can lead to the charge of what Barrett and Carney (2005) call the “conflicting purposes” of e-portfolios: accountability (evidence-based, constructed around externally defined objectives), learning (process-orientated, reflective) and marketing (presenting a ‘best face’ to the world). They write that “these models are based upon paradigms that are often at odds, philosophically, with each other” (p.1), but this is more than a philosophical dilemma for students. Attempts to combine, for instance, reflection with high-stakes assessment in a single portfolio can, as we saw Boud et al (1985) argue, affect the way that students will reflect about their mistakes, concerns or weaknesses.

The imperatives of assessment are normalised in e-portfolio literature to such an extent, however, that Barrett and Carney (2005) go on to argue that while an e-portfolio should ideally not be used for summative assessments, and should instead support process, “deep learning” and reflection through formative assessment, institutional demands for data for accreditation must be met. This notion is taken up by other authors as well: so, for example, there is a claim that “one should only ask for student reflections if the portfolio system can guarantee their authenticity” (Meeus, Questier, & Derks, 2006, p.136), a clear indication that assessment is the overriding purpose of reflection.

Barrett and Carney (2005) propose a “balanced” assessment system with clear delineations between the different sorts of data being collected and presented. An archive of evidence is the centre point of a system which separates the learner’s portfolio from the institution’s assessment structures. They believe that technology can be made to support such a balanced system and that great learning advantages will follow from getting it right.

Cambridge (2010) argues that what he calls “deliberative assessment” (p.73) supports authenticity and integration in students’ e-portfolio work and is therefore a

legitimate and valuable assessment practice. He suggests that both “standardized” and “subjectivist” methods of e-portfolio assessment are problematic because they preclude processes of “deliberative democracy” (p.69). Standardised methods mask the deliberations that take place in setting standards and producing normative orientations to those standards (p.71). Subjectivist methods privatise and make exclusive the judgements of quality that are held to be possible only within extremely local, specific contexts, by individual teachers as experts (p.73). He argues, though, that “deliberative assessment” can turn assessment criteria (which he calls “competencies”) into “boundary objects” which “make it possible for individuals and groups with different experiences and priorities to collaborate in shared enterprises while acknowledging those differences” (p.74). The humanist ideals of reason, authenticity and integration that underpin Cambridge’s conception of the educational process allow him to argue that the process and products (the competencies) of deliberative assessment is validated by the student experience: “to the extent that students are successful in expressing their experiences and beliefs in an authentic way within the shared framework of the competencies, they demonstrate that the college has been successful” (p.76).

Ayala (2006), on the other hand, argues that e-portfolios are rarely adopted institutionally for the benefit of student learning, but rather are prized for their administrative convenience. This further complicates the “accountability” paradigm in light of administrative priorities and demands. Placier, Fitzgerald and Hall (2001) give a striking example of a teacher education programme’s e-portfolio being “transformed from the individualistic, developmental, constructivist vision ...to a policy tool designed to address external program and state requirements” (p.7), and discuss in detail the negative impact of this orientation on students. For these authors, technology does not have the power to mask these demands enough to allow the ‘freedom’ of authentic reflection.

The term ‘reflective e-portfolio’ is often used not only to refer to the presence of written reflections, but also to a general quality of openness, unpolishedness, an honest assessment of weaknesses (Stefani, Mason, & Pegler, 2007, p.73). It is, in the

discourse of e-portfolios, the opposite of a showcase or marketing portfolio. This construction of reflection as honest, spontaneous and confessional, in contrast to the strategic, selective and knowing ‘showcase’, accounts for the panic over conflicting paradigms. As Orland-Barak (2005) argues of paper-based portfolios, though, the larger context of practice (in her case, a centralised education system which defined the nature of the portfolios in use in local institutions for teacher training) means that different purposes do not necessarily produce different results: a ‘process’ and a ‘product’ portfolio created in the same context look, she argues, strikingly similar in terms of their content and level or lack of criticality.

When a lack of critical reflection is raised as a problem with e-portfolios or assessment of e-portfolios, the solution offered by authors is often ‘more reflection’ or better integration (Klenowski & Lunt, 2008, p.215). It is rare for authors to question the fit between reflection, assessment and e-portfolios. Perhaps this reflects the prevalence of ‘accounts of practice’ and the investment that many authors have in their own practices. Authors also have a tendency to conflate benefits of the e-portfolio with the effects of assessment. So, for example, Duque et al (2006) claim that the accessibility and continuity of the e-portfolio encourages reflection over time, and count their project a success, while glossing over the fact that students would only receive marks for items with a ‘reflective’ element.

Constraints imposed by e-portfolios can be explained by structures and technologies as well as purposes and audiences. Templates, which are designed to help students structure their portfolios, can result both in tick-box or form-filling mentalities (Placier et al., 2001) and in portfolios which are basically duplicates of one another (Baldwin, 2006). Kimball (2005) agrees, arguing that template driven e-portfolios run the risk of:

stereotyping students, forcing them to make their work and their identity fit into a preconceived visual rhetoric of a certain kind of student...  
Overstandardizing the form, appearance, and structure of the portfolio reduces the possibility for real reflection and learning. (p.453)

The notion of the template will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

Calling for a critical examination of the uses to which e-portfolios are being put, Kimball (2005) identifies some theoretical principles underpinning portfolio pedagogy: reflection, connection, process and activation, and asks whether e-portfolios can and do support these. He expresses concern that “in the excitement of creating new database portfolio systems that make drastic changes to the scope and permeability of portfolios, we may have left some of these theoretical principles behind” (p.437), and goes on to say that “database portfolio systems may simply accelerate the growing institutional appetite for data” (p.438), and move away from reflection as the heart of the portfolio.

An institutional focus is at odds with the arguments often put forward about the importance of conscious engagement with e-portfolios as personal narratives. Some authors argue that the ideal e-portfolio uses artefacts and evidence to tell a story of learning, practice, identity or development (McAlpine, 2005). Reflection and stories are closely linked, but not necessarily identical: “composing a digital story is much more than simple digital reflection. It involves a conscious process of choice and intention to represent” (Tendero, 2006, p.178). Dubinsky (2003) says that this process helps students “recognize that their work can actually be represented as scholarship, and as such, as part of their field’s intellectual property” (p.2). Barrett (2004, 2006) is one of the key proponents of the connection of e-portfolios with digital storytelling, and she claims that “if we are to help learners create portfolios that truly support assessment for learning ... we need to look at strategies that help the learner tell a story of their own learning[,] strategies that foster learner self-motivation” (2004, online).

Dubinsky (2003) also claims that his students will be “writing themselves” for an audience, and will be forced to be reflective in considering “what they decide to share and why, considering how these choices create a personality, complete with documented skills and talents” (p.8). The digital portfolio “asks students to write *for the screen* as well as *for the page*; to create relationships between and among linked material, as between and among experiences; to update it as a habit of mind; and to

represent learning in part by exploring the connections the digital environment invites” (Yancey, 2004, p.754).

An emphasis on deliberation, choice and autonomy reflects the nature of the literature on online reflection. As in the previous section on reflection, subjectivity is mostly treated as unproblematic in relation to online reflection. The humanist self is not at all problematised by the current literature the way one might expect given the issues of fragmentation, embodiment, networks and the database that emerge from theoretical engagement with online subjectivity. One notable exception is Yancey (2004), who argues that the student represented in an electronic portfolio is different from that in a paper based portfolio (p.742), and that the possibilities for hypertextual, multi-modal, multiple and non-linear presentation of material in an e-portfolio are coupled with the doubly-authored (student and system) nature of many e-portfolios to create new forms of student selves. This leads again to the question of whether reflection in an online space *captures* or *produces* the experience and knowledge which is to be assessed, and this question will be addressed extensively in this thesis, particularly in Chapters 7 and 8. McAlpine goes some way towards connecting e-portfolio practices with the issues relating to “database subjectivity” (Jarrett, 2004) that were discussed in the second part of this chapter. She notes that “the power over temporal structuring [in the e-portfolio] is undermined by database structure, which affords equal value given to all entries” (McAlpine, 2005, p.383), a matter which will be discussed more in Chapter 5. However, where I argue that this calls for a new orientation towards subjectivity in reflection, McAlpine maintains that the e-portfolio ultimately offers “control of narrative” (p.384) by the learner, and therefore represents a strengthening of learner autonomy.

### **Blogs: audience, privacy and dialogue**

Unlike e-portfolios, whose development emerged from a tradition of educational portfolio building, blogs have been imported from internet culture, often because of their popularity and the belief that students will respond to them. Duffy and Bruns (2006) argue that the popularity of blogging indicates “a growing impetus towards personal expression and reflection, and also the sharing of personal ‘spaces’ – it is

now possible to harness these developments in an educational context” (p.34). This “harnessing” has included explicitly comparing blogs with learning journals, as Duffy and Bruns and also Hain and Back (2008) do. The mapping of blogs onto learning journals can be awkward, though, when it comes to issues of audience and assessment. As we saw in relation to the discussion of e-portfolios above, there is a tendency in the literature on educational blogging to attribute benefits to blogging while neglecting to consider the motivation provided by assessment or other forms of compulsion (Sim & Hew, 2010, p.7).

Where e-portfolios are often extremely fine-grained in terms of access permissions, and where their default settings are normally private and closed, blogs have typically been accepted as at least semi-public environments, and many teachers value them for exactly this reason: they provoke an awareness of audience and voice (Walker, 2005), and communities of learners can inspire and encourage one another (Ladyshevsky & Gardner, 2008).

Furthermore, the entrance of blogging into educational settings has been accompanied by a decoupling of the notions of ‘personal’ and ‘private’. In part this may be a technical issue: unlike e-portfolio content, blog entries are usually not subject to a process of ‘selection’ or the concept of ‘presentation’ – the blog is diary-like, and the ‘publish’ button adds a blog post to the diary – there is normally no suggestion that the writer will then return to filter, select or recombine blog posts for presentational purposes (except when blogs are part of e-portfolios), though recombination does occur, Jarrett (2004) argues, as an inevitable part of the blogging process.

Additionally, the willingness of millions of bloggers to disclose their most personal thoughts (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004) has apparently convinced educators that blogs are the magic ingredient for transforming resistance to (or perhaps passive compliance with) reflection into engaged, self-motivated reflective practice. No longer is it seen to be the case that what is personal, intimate or difficult for an individual student is necessary to keep secret or private. It would seem that teachers

have concluded (perhaps spurred on by media reports, as Barnes (2006) argues) that their younger students will not object to sharing their reflections in a blogging context, since it is often argued that young people have no interest in online privacy (Lenhart, 2005). Indeed, if anything, they will have to be held back and taught about the dangers of putting too much information (or the wrong kind) online (Wishart, 2004).

More recent work on youth social media practices has revealed that, as boyd has pointed out, privacy remains important to everyone, including young people. However, its meaning is different in mediated spaces, where it denotes the ability to “limit access through social conventions” (boyd, 2008, p.131), and where tactics such as “security through obscurity” replace structural boundaries (p.133). This will be discussed more in Chapter 5. The emphasis on community and audience therefore poses problems in relation to the notion that learning journals are meant to be safe spaces in which students can honestly and critically explore their experiences. The openness and confessional quality of many blogs is supported by bloggers’ ability to limit their exposure (to an extent, and not always successfully – as the journalist Emily Gould (2008) discovered when her personal and professional blogging practices became blurred and she gained unwanted attention and criticism). Furthermore, bloggers in the public domain often play with identity, anonymity and blur the lines between fiction and ‘fact’ (Holbrook, 2006). Student bloggers almost never have the option to openly experiment with identity in this way, and the limits being set are usually not within their control. So, where the presence of a reading public, even one whose members are all known to the author, might stimulate participation, it does not necessarily provoke reflection: educational blogs (especially those which are high-stakes in any way) can suffer from the same problems as high-stakes reflection in other contexts: primarily, a lack of critical reflection (Yang, 2009).

The notion of dialogue is also a complicated one in educational blog settings. Comments and participation from peers and tutors is mooted as one of the key benefits of blogging for learning. Williams and Jacobs (2004, online) argue that



blogs tap into informal peer learning and develop students' ability to formulate and stand by opinions: "writing a blog ... forces a student to confront their own opinions and contemplate how their views might be interpreted and reflected upon by others". However, the development of a culture of constructive feedback and commenting is not trivial, and when this does not emerge, there can be adverse effects on the learning, enjoyment and reflective practice of student bloggers (Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup, & Conole, 2008; Sim & Hew, 2010).

Furthermore, pervasive discourses of teaching efficiency and time-saving associated with e-learning in general (Clegg et al., 2003) are probably especially unhelpful when it comes to blogging. While 'feedback' is often used as a catchall term and does not always distinguish between peer and teacher contributions, it is clear from some of the most positive reports on educational blogging that the establishment and maintenance of a teacher presence in student blogs is key (Hughes & Purnell, 2008; Quinn, Duff, & Johnston, 2007), and while it is not explicitly discussed in these papers, we will see from a number of my teacher interviews that this feedback and engagement is extremely time-consuming. Blogging is therefore not a quick fix for promoting reflection, and getting it wrong can result in especially unsatisfactory experiences for students and teachers, again as we will see.

### **In support of more theory**

In this section I have touched on some themes and issues from the literature on online reflection which are certainly ripe for further exploration: the construction of reflection as a technical affordance rather than a complex and contested area of study; the wide acceptance of assessment as an unproblematic feature of online reflection, and the attribution of 'success' to online reflective practices that elides the role of compulsion; the problematic discourse of conflicting paradigms; the ways in which templates can constitute students' subject positions; the meanings of privacy and the decoupling of notions of 'personal' and 'private'; and the importance of dialogue and feedback.

Many of these issues will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters, and the more critical literature (from Clegg, Yancey, Kimball, and Hughes and Purnell, for example) will be drawn on again. However, the majority of published literature on online reflection is descriptive and, perhaps as a result, seriously undertheorised. Unfortunately this is not uncommon in the field of e-learning, though as the field matures it is becoming more critical and rigorous. This work aims to contribute to the move towards greater theorisation and criticality of this area of study.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced some key theoretical positions and matters of concern that will be taken up in the rest of this thesis. I have established the Foucauldian underpinnings of this work, and shown how the literature on online subjectivity could inform much-needed new perspectives on online reflection. In addition, I have identified some gaps in the literature, particularly around problematising humanist reflective practices and theorising online reflection, and indicated how this research contributes to advancing knowledge in these areas.

The next chapter describes the research I conducted, discussing its methodology, epistemological and theoretical frameworks, and the practicalities of how I went about investigating high-stakes online reflection in higher education.



## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This has been a qualitative study involving students and teachers in higher education programmes in the UK. Its methodology consisted of interviewing students and teachers to find out how they were negotiating practices that discursively position them in multiple ways. I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews, which were designed to tease out ambivalent, uncertain places where student and teacher interpretations and descriptions of their experiences and practices exposed ambiguities.

The ultimate goal of the research was to problematise a simplistic application of humanist ideals of reflection to complex practices, and to propose how high-stakes online reflection could be theorised differently. The goal in my interviews was therefore to get a picture of the complexity of these practices and the ways that students and teachers took up, rejected and reframed the various discourses of online reflection available to them.

This chapter unfolds (albeit unevenly) from the pragmatic to the theoretical. The first few sections explain how the data I write about in the subsequent chapters of this thesis was generated and analysed, and what methodological choices informed its production. My aim here is to allow readers to understand the practicalities of the research project, and to persuade them that I approached the task with an eye to producing data satisfactory in quality and quantity for empirical social science research at doctoral level. I will explain how the research questions being investigated informed my choices of method and analysis, how I planned my research, and what did and did not go according to that plan. I describe my consideration of the ethical issues involved in this project and aspects of the process of analysis of the data.

The final section of this chapter has a different aim: to show that, even with the most careful planning, there is no method that uncovers truth. Rather, method generates its truths. This section sets out a rationale for considering this research to belong to a

post-structuralist paradigm, examining how I have approached issues of the nature of experience, reflexivity, validity and subjectivity from a post-structuralist perspective, and what implications this has for how the research that follows should be read.

## **Finding and selecting participants**

In this research I worked with ‘constellations’ of students and teachers, with each ‘constellation’ consisting of one or more teachers and two or more students from a single academic programme. Interviewing both students and teachers from the programmes involved provided a context of practice in which to situate the data that was generated. In the end I had six such constellations, plus another three teachers from two additional disciplines who had insights into assessing online reflection but where full involvement of the programme was not possible (in one case because the high-stakes elements of reflection had been abandoned, in another because the timing meant there were no students available to be part of the study).

I approached lecturers and programme leaders in the first instance, and requested their participation and permission to contact their students. Although I recognised that this potentially put me at a disadvantage in terms of being seen by students as allied with their tutors (see ethical issues, below), lecturers were clearly the gatekeepers to the programme-level context that was important for analysing the reflective practices being studied here.

I conducted 31 interviews in total, between May 2008 and June 2009. Most lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and all were digitally recorded and later transcribed for analysis. In addition, 15 students shared course-related reflective artefacts with me, and 5 teachers shared programme- or course-related documents (handbooks, assignment guidelines, assessment rubrics, etc), all of which were intended to form part of a documentary analysis, but which in the end I did not make use of in this thesis, for reasons that will be recounted later.

Potential participants were approached through a number of channels: through a general request on two relevant email lists of which I was already a member; through

several key informants knowledgeable about e-portfolios who sent my request to their own contacts; and through my contacts from an e-portfolio project I had worked on in 2005/06 (referred to in the background section of Chapter 1). The wording of my request varied slightly, but was generally along these lines:

*I am looking to make contact with Higher Education lecturers in the UK whose students are currently using online environments to do reflective writing which is either summatively assessed or used as evidence for progression or membership in a profession or professional body. These might be blog or e-portfolio environments, for example.*

*I would like to involve lecturers and small groups of students across five or six courses or programmes as research participants in my qualitative study of online reflective practices and performances.*

*I would be really grateful if you could get in touch with me if you or someone you know might be a relevant contact, or forward my details on to anyone who might be interested in talking to me. If you would like more information about my project, please also let me know!*

Rather than starting with a definition of online reflection and then seeking participants who agreed with that definition, I left the term “online reflection” to stand alone in my initial approaches, and allowed potential participants to define themselves as assessing reflection on their programmes or courses. I thought this would usefully expose some of the contrasts in understandings of reflection, which it has.

A number of people responded on their own behalf or with suggested leads to follow up on. I corresponded with everyone who contacted me, and contacted quite a few others directly, and I learned quite a bit about the landscape of practice in this area in the UK, even from those who did not fit my criteria. In retrospect it could have been useful to have undertaken a more formal mapping exercise by sending out a short survey to generate some data on the prevalence, nature and spread of these practices (some work like this has been done by Strivens et al., 2009). At any rate, I can say that at the time of these initial contacts – Spring 2008 – I corresponded with more than 65 people with an interest, or some experience, in the area of assessing online

reflection and that, while assessing reflection appeared to be a minority activity in terms of blog and e-portfolio use in higher education, there was widespread awareness of the practice and a number of programmes and courses known to be engaged in it.

Through this correspondence, I narrowed the respondents down to people who were currently engaged in high-stakes online reflection in a higher education context, and were not in their first year of doing so. I wanted participants to have been through at least one cycle of assessing reflection, so that they would have views about the whole process, and also to ensure I was involving people who were continuing to assess online reflection because either they had to, or at some level they felt it had worked. I invited those who fitted these criteria to participate in my project, and explained that participation would involve:

- being interviewed by me;
- sharing relevant documentation about their high-stakes reflective practice;
- helping me get access to students on their programme, who would be invited to participate in interviews and asked to share their reflective artefacts.

I was keen to have participants from a spread of disciplines, including professional, vocational and more traditionally ‘academic’ subject areas, and to get a mix of undergraduate, postgraduate, campus-based, blended and distance programmes. In the end, it is notable that all the disciplines from which the constellations were drawn – indeed, the disciplines of nearly all the potential participants who made contact with me – are professional or vocational. This reflects the state of the field at the moment in higher education in the UK (Strivens et al., 2009), as described in more detail in Chapter 1. This may continue to be the case in future, or these could be seen as ‘vanguard’ courses and programmes which point the way for others. In other respects the mix of programmes did represent a range of type, mode and discipline. There was a weighting towards Education, with three of the six constellations coming from that discipline, which I attribute mostly to my own greater familiarity with and number of contacts in that area.

In terms of demographics, four of the universities involved in my study were based in England, and the other four in Scotland. The gender mix of my participants was weighted towards women: I spoke with 14 female and 6 male students, and 9 female and 3 male teachers. I have not attempted to discuss or problematise the discourse of so-called ‘gender differences’ in terms of reflection, but this is an area that could be fruitful to explore in future research. The cultural backgrounds of participants was mainly English or Scottish, but I also spoke with students from Germany, Italy, Australia, Canada, and the Ukraine. I did not explore class or race issues in my study, and did not ask questions to elicit this information.

## Summary of data

### *Programmes with full involvement*

Discipline	Programme type	Interviewees	Notes
Health Studies	Undergraduate, on campus	4 students 1 lecturer	Lecturer face-to-face. Met cohort for a session on ‘metaphor’ – obtained visual data. Student interviews by phone.
Built Environment	Undergraduate, on campus	3 students 1 lecturer	Student interviews face-to-face, lecturer by phone.
Social Work	Undergraduate, on campus	2 students 2 lecturers	Phone interviews.
Education	Postgraduate, blended	2 students 1 lecturer	Phone interviews.
Education	Postgraduate, distance	4 students 2 tutors 1 lecturer	Phone interviews.
Education	Postgraduate, distance	5 students 1 lecturer	Mix of face-to-face and phone interviews.

### *Programmes with partial involvement (lecturers only)*

Discipline	Programme type	Interviewees
Pharmacy	Undergraduate, on campus	1 lecturer, in person
Law	Postgraduate, on campus	2 lecturers (interviewed together), in person

Total number of interviews: 31 (20 students, 12 lecturers – 2 interviewed together)



## **Interview mode**

Although not explicitly my intention at the outset, for practical reasons the majority of the interviews (22 of 31) were conducted over the phone or, on two occasions, using Voice-over-IP software (Skype), while only nine were face-to-face. Usually this was due to the time constraints of participants, or their geographical location. For members of distance programmes this was particularly an issue; two of my interviewees were outside the UK, while others were scattered throughout the country. On one occasion I was ill when I was due to travel to conduct interviews on a campus, and rescheduled the interviews to be conducted via telephone. As a result of having done most of my interviewing in this way for this research, and having a fair amount of experience on other projects of face-to-face interviewing, I have gained some insight into the strengths and weaknesses of voice-only qualitative interviewing.

On a purely practical level, telephone interviewing is usually very convenient for participants, taking up only the time of the interview itself, and being able to take place wherever is most suitable for them. Mostly interviewees were at home when I spoke with them. I was able to be more flexible in terms of times and dates of interviews because I was not travelling and therefore not on a tight schedule. Participants were in their own spaces, and not dealing face-to-face with a stranger, and most appeared to be quite comfortable with the medium. On the negative side, establishing rapport and conveying interest and engagement as an interviewer is more difficult without visual cues such as nodding and eye contact. This appeared to cause uneasiness for some people: one interviewee spent the first few minutes of the interview asking me questions about where I was, and describing his own view, and one was concerned that she was boring me when she took my listening silence for lack of interest. However, as Novick points out (2008, p.395), establishing rapport is a challenge for interviewers in any mode. There are skills involved in putting interviewees at ease which may differ slightly between modes, but my main strategies in all cases were:

- to communicate in a friendly way by email before the interview;
- to signal my interest in the interviewee's views and my appreciation for their participation;
- to spend a few minutes at the start of each interview describing the nature of the interview, how long it would take, and that although I had questions written down it was fine to go off track into other areas of interest;
- to start with a few 'easy' questions to put interviewees at ease.

My experience of conducting interviews face-to-face has been that they have often had an energy and an edge – a sense of being high-stakes – while voice-only interviews often felt more relaxed. However, in terms of the amount and quality of the data generated, I found the results of each mode to be comparable, whether the interview was face-to-face, by phone, or over Skype. There are very few studies comparing the effectiveness of telephone and face-to-face qualitative interviewing, although there is a fair amount of possibly unfounded bias against the practice, with loss of nonverbal, contextual and verbal data (through shorter or less reflective responses) being cited as reasons why face-to-face interviewing is better than voice-only (Novick, 2008, p.395). My own experiences reflect those of Sturges and Hanrahan (2004), who found that offering the option of telephone interviews to their potential participants improved access, allowed for more flexibility, and did not adversely impact on the quality of the data generated.

Being in front of a computer, using Skype rather than a telephone, raised some slightly different issues. At the end of one early interview using Skype (voice-only rather than video chat), Lynne and I discussed our experience of using that medium:

*Jen: how did you find [Skype] by the way? Is it strange? I mean I find it, I do find it a little strange, um, even weirder than the phone for some reason.*

*Lynne (student, PG): It's because, it's because you've got your hands free I think [laugh]*

*Jen: maybe that's it, and also because I'm looking at my computer screen and, you know, it's just kind of, it is, it does feel quite different from other ways of conducting interviews.*

*Lynne: yeah. Actually for the, for the first couple of minutes I had my eyes closed so I could concentrate on what on what you were saying rather than being distracted, cause I thought it was going to be more distracting than, um than using the phone when you're kind of a bit more focused, but um no it's quite a good way to do it, actually, yeah.*

However, during a number of phone interviews, participants mentioned having their computers on, looking at or for examples of their reflections or other material during the interview, so the presence of networked computers in my interviews was not limited to the two done via Skype. In addition, sometimes I used the Skype-to-phone feature to make telephone calls to participants, so I was sitting with my laptop while they were on the phone.

In general, I agree with Kazmer and Zie (2008), who attribute the success of interaction modes in interviews to the comfort of both interviewer and interviewee with in-depth discussion in that mode:

When participants and interviewer are comfortable in the interaction mode – online, via telephone or face to face – they have an easier time using their social skills to build the rapport needed to achieve the research goals of the interview. When rapport is established and both people are comfortable in the medium, they in turn find it easier to share affective data during the interview. (p.274)

## **Interview format and style**

I developed a semi-structured interview format for all of the interviews in this research. My goal in conducting this research was to understand how students and teachers negotiated and made sense of the online reflective practices they were engaged in, and a semi-structured interview allowed for both a focus on the issues of importance to me, and a flexibility in following the interests and impressions of interviewees. I was also able to adapt my questions to the particular context of each programme, discipline, and use of technology, which was very helpful in getting a more detailed picture of the interplay of these three factors. My interviews were often more structured than Wengraf (2001), for example, might consider as being purely semi-structured; for him, semi-structured interviews are those where improvised questions make up at least half of the interview (p.5), and generally that was not the case in my interviews. However, I adopted what I see as the key features of the semi-structured approach: allowing both the researcher and the interviewee to shape the structure and direction of the interview; improvising questions, prompts

and probes as appropriate; and being prepared to reorder questions to take account of the interview's momentum.

In front of me during each interview was a schedule of questions and prompts, tailored for students or teachers and for the different contexts of the programmes, which I drew from flexibly throughout the interview (see sample schedules in Appendix A). I had a clear idea of the topics I wanted to cover, but was also happy to have new ideas and questions emerge during the interviews. I generally referred to the existence of this schedule at the start of the interview, and explained to each interviewee that I had a list of questions but that it was not necessary to get through all of them, and if we went off on a tangent that was also fine. The interviews were fairly conversational and informal in style, and each one took its own particular path. I asked for clarification and asked new questions depending on what was being said.

As Wengraf (2001) notes, semi-structured interviews must be especially well designed to work: “they are *semi*-structured, but they must be *fully* planned and prepared” (p.5). He also notes that they require the interviewer to think on her feet and successfully improvise. These two are not mutually exclusive: I have found that the better prepared I am in terms of being immersed in the research context at the time of the interview, the better the interviews, and the improvisation, have gone.

Wengraf also describes semi-structured interviews as requiring more discipline than structured ones. It is particularly difficult to avoid being leading in a semi-structured interview. For me, the main tendency I had to guard against in my improvised questions was to ask a question immediately followed by giving possible answers (for example: “why do you think that was? Was it because of A or B?”). I think that I did this with good intentions, to try to clarify a question that I was afraid had been confusing, but it was a bad habit which I think I made progress with eradicating in my research practice.

Finally, semi-structured interviewing, while being aimed at “exploring the subjective world of the interviewee”, is not uncritical (p.28), and there is a balance to be struck

between demonstrating an understanding and acceptance of what interviewees say, and being challenging. I tended in my interviews towards friendliness and understanding, but when I became aware during transcription of early interviews that I was sometimes agreeing with the interviewee automatically, without testing my understanding of what was being said, I tried to be more challenging in subsequent interviews, asking questions about contradictions or points that were not clear to me.

## **Metaphor**

One of the key aspects of my interviews involved asking interviewees to create metaphors for their online reflective spaces. When meeting face-to-face, I offered interviewees the option to draw their metaphor; over the phone I asked them to describe it. This strategy has its roots in visual methods (Rose, 2007), as my intention was to open alternative ways of knowing and understanding the topic through the use of imagery. The drawings or descriptions of metaphors, along with the conversation around them, emerged as one of the most vibrant and interesting parts of some of my interviews, giving me new perspectives on difficult issues like ownership, performance and the relationship between students and teachers.

Metaphors offers a creative and visual way of thinking about a subject, but they are also, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have argued, “pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action... the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor” (p.3). I take metaphor very seriously, therefore, and have considered not only the metaphors I explicitly elicited, but also those which emerged in the interviews and in the reflective artefacts and documentation, as being important in understanding how students and teachers interpret online reflective practices.

In addition to asking for metaphors at the end of each interview, I also had the opportunity in one case to visit a cohort who were going to be participating in my research, and to discuss metaphor with them as a way of representing their own and others’ interpretations of situations. Each member of this group was given a worksheet and asked to draw and/or write a metaphor for their e-portfolio. The

variety of responses was interesting and inspiring, and some of the visual accounts that were produced in this session appear in the chapters that follow.

The use of these visual metaphors raises an issue about the status of the visual in a mostly textual account. I propose that these images *are* first and foremost metaphors, and should be understood as part of the research context in that way. However, images are often taken as more ‘true’ or revealing than text (Rose, 2007, pp.2-3), and therefore not subject to the same critical analysis. Vision is itself a metaphor for knowing, but this metaphoric relation has been forgotten in our visual culture:

Human optics are assumed to accurately reflect externality ... Visual symbolism, the primary form of symbolism within the culture, is dispossessed of its iconographic, or metaphoric, role and routinely understood as ‘correspondence’. (Jenks, 1995, p14)

Baudrillard (1993) describes “a brute fascination [in images] unencumbered by aesthetic, moral, social or political judgements” (p.194). Ocularcentrism, as Julier (2006) puts it: “renders the viewer almost inanimate in relation to the viewed. ... This rigid process of looking is underpinned and promoted by the habit of disembodiment of images from their primary contexts of encounter” (p.66). To break down such rigidity, where I have used these images I have attempted to look at, rather than through, them by citing parts of conversation around them, describing the specific contexts of their production, and offering my own interpretations as provisional and open to further scrutiny.

## **A path that strayed: accessing and collecting documents**

In addition to the interview data, where I asked participants to articulate their understandings of issues around online reflection, I wanted to collect and analyse reflective artefacts themselves, and the programme-related documentation which informed the generation of these artefacts. My goal in doing so was to see to what extent I could observe in these documents the nature of students’ and teachers’ approaches to high-stakes reflection, and how reflection was discursively constructed

between teachers and students through their written communications. As pre-existing secondary sources (Wellington, 2000, p.109), and situated towards the private and restricted end of the continuum (p. 111), these documents seemed likely to provide valuable additional perspectives on the issues of importance to me.

Although I collected a number of these artefacts, I did not fully analyse them, and have not (with one exception, the examples of assessment criteria in Chapter 4) made use of them in this thesis. Primarily this is because I was unable to resolve some complications that emerged during the data generation phase of the research. Asking for and receiving programme documents from lecturers, such as copies of the instructions for reflective assignments, was relatively straightforward, though not all shared this material with me. However, accessing student-generated reflective artefacts proved to be more complicated on technical, interpersonal and ethical levels than I had anticipated, and the collection and storage of the artefacts was less than ideal, given that it involved substantial loss of their digital, multimodal and hyperlinked nature.

On a technical level, most programmes' e-portfolio and blog environments had sophisticated permission settings and required special action on the part of students to share objects with external viewers. Not all students knew how to give me permission to see their reflective artefacts, and while I was able to talk some through systems with which I was already familiar, for others the access proved too complicated and they gave up. In this sense their participation in interviews was less problematic for them than the time and effort involved in figuring out how to give me access to their reflections. The access I did get was often of uncertain duration, which meant I had to act immediately to capture and store versions of the artefacts locally.

The archiving of the reflective artefacts was problematic because the original e-portfolio or blog interfaces were a complex mix of templates, text, images and hyperlinks, which did not translate well to being saved as offline HTML or PDF files. There was a tension for me between awareness that I would want to analyse the

text using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software, which is limited in its ability to import multimodal files, the need to act quickly to capture the data that had been shared with me, and the awareness that their digitality was an important aspect of the artefacts. In the end I was unhappy with the limitations of the archives I was able to produce.

In interpersonal terms, some students were anxious about sharing their reflections with a stranger – again, possibly more so than they were to take part in an interview. Two students opted to share assignments with a reflective component rather than their e-portfolios or blogs, despite the latter also being the focus of assessment on their courses. For my part, I was concerned about how I could ethically and usefully cite these documents without running the risk of compromising the anonymity of student interviewees. I will say more about this in the following section.

Partly as a result of these complications, and partly because of the large amount of interview data I wanted to use, I decided to leave this documentary data for future research. I believe that there is much to be gained from a discourse analytic approach to reflective artefacts, and a future project which was designed in such a way as to address the issues I encountered here would be of interest and value in further theorising high-stakes online reflective practices.

## **Ethical issues and permissions**

As I was conducting research in the higher education sector, where formal ethical approval for research is the norm, I requested that my ethics application be reviewed by my School's ethics committee (rather than signed off by my supervisors, as was more common at the time for doctoral projects in my university). Being able to provide a formal approval letter to programme leaders smoothed the way to participation in a few cases. In addition, several of the programmes in my study had their own institutional ethical approval mechanisms which meant I needed to provide copies of my ethics documentation and interview schedules in advance of getting permission for programmes to participate. One programme required me to complete an extensive ethical approval application for their own ethics committee. Another



requested a report of the key points arising from the interviews as a condition of access.

In all cases, every participant in my study filled in a consent form, either in hard copy or online, giving permission for me to interview them, to record and transcribe the interview, and to use the data generated in anonymised form in my research and future publications. Each participant was made aware of the nature and context of my research, and that their consent to participate was strictly voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time. The consent forms for lecturers and students are provided in Appendix B.

The ethical issues of primary concern to me in this project related to student participants, and were around choice and consent, and privacy and anonymity. The most practical way to get access to student participants was through their lecturers (Seidman, 2006, pp.43-5; Wanat, 2008). For this reason it was likely that I was seen by students as associated with their lecturers, and some students may have felt it was beneficial to them to be seen to participate in my project. In one case that I knew of, the teacher selected and put me in touch with the students who would speak with me. Other teachers announced the research to their classes and allowed them to contact me (or vice versa). In both cases, there is a general issue of the extent to which certain kinds of students (less critical? more engaged?) are likely to participate in research studies like mine, and what the effect on the data generated might therefore be.

I was clear in my communications with students that participation was strictly voluntary, and that I was approaching them as a student myself. As with all researcher-participant relationships, however, power is a tricky and shifting dynamic:

Subjective positions create multiple relations of power. A researcher is not necessarily powerful, and other identities, such as gender and nationality, should be attended to. ... This is not to say that researchers should not consider themselves powerful and act in ways that aim to produce more egalitarian relationships, but that this aim should not reduce our theorising

of a more complex power dynamic. (Riley, Schouten, & Cahill, 2003, p.12)

A second issue which affected the student participants in my research was one of privacy and anonymity. While all participants were assured that any data I used from interviews with them would be anonymised, it was also the case that in sharing their reflective artefacts with me they opened themselves up to being recognised by their lecturers in any published data from my research. Using the same pseudonym in order to be able to make connections between the interviews and reflections would have meant that student interview data was perhaps somewhat less anonymous than students might assume. This was part of the difficulty I had in approaching the analysis and use of this artefact data, and part of why I decided not to pursue it in this thesis.

A third issue related to my critical take on reflective practices, and how to ensure that this did not lead me into a position of criticising individual teachers, who were consistently generous with their time, and open with me about their experiences with high-stakes online reflection. I respect the commitment that the teachers I met had to the best interests of their students and their professions. My goal in conducting these interviews was to understand how students and teachers negotiated what I saw as difficult issues relating to power, authenticity and performativity in high-stakes online reflection, not to criticise the work of teachers, and this is the stance that I have taken throughout this research. Grappling with this tension was one of the most rewarding parts of this project, as it made me feel a responsibility for proposing new and alternative practices in the place of the ones I am criticising, and forced me to move from a position of detached criticality to a position of creative criticality.

## **Transcription**

A key, and still undertheorised and neglected aspect of using interviews as a method of data generation is that they must usually be transcribed into textual form before being analysed and drawn on in written academic prose. Transcription represents a key moment of choice and the exercise of power in the research process and, as has

been argued, it is not given nearly enough attention in the qualitative research literature (Lapadat, 2000), or in researchers' accounts of their work. Many qualitative researchers appear to believe (or at least proceed as if they believe) that transcription is relatively unproblematic, in the sense that either meaning is totally separate from form and therefore transcription choices are merely a matter of preference (or budget), or that meaning is intrinsically bound to form but that an accurate transformation can be produced.

I started out in this research project wanting each of my transcripts to be as faithful a representation of the interview as possible. For me this meant attempting to transcribe everything that was said, including repetition, stumbles and the rest, despite the messiness and troublesomeness of producing and then citing or working with these transcripts. For one thing, I thought, how would I decide what to leave out if I were to deliberately selectively transcribe? I told myself that I knew this was still my interpretation, and that I would be highly selective when I came to writing up my research, and I told myself I was acknowledging that. But I really wanted my data to sound authentic, and I had not deeply examined what I meant by that.

Things got messier still when time pressures meant that I needed to send some of my recordings away to be transcribed externally. I worked with a local transcriber and provided her with a style sheet, example transcription of my own, and a list of key words and phrases that would be likely to come up in each interview. I asked her to "transcribe as close to verbatim as possible – including 'ums' etc, laughter, and pauses". On receiving each completed transcript, I listened to the interview recording while working through the transcript to catch anything that was mis-transcribed or missed by the transcriber. However, to my mind the transcripts I produced from scratch are distinct from even the final versions of the other transcriber's work, the versions that I checked and amended. This is not to say that mine are *better* in any objective sense, but rather that they reflect my conscious and unconscious beliefs about language, meaning, conversation and representation, while hers reflect hers. Not attending to transcription choices, does not mean that no choice is being made: "researchers make choices about transcription that enact the theories that they hold.

If these theories and their relationships to research processes are left implicit, it is difficult to examine them or to interpret the findings that follow from them” (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, p.66).

As I have argued elsewhere (Ross, 2010), the field of translation studies and its engagement with visibility, power, authenticity and fidelity has a lot to offer to qualitative researchers working critically with transcription theory and practice. My understanding of transcription has been greatly influenced by translation studies, particularly Venuti’s concepts of domestication and foreignisation. Domestication implies assimilation to dominant ‘home’ values of the target culture, while foreignisation is a deliberate othering or making strange of the translated text to highlight its source in another place or time. Venuti (1998) attends to the political and ideological implications of translation and links these strategies explicitly to concerns of power, subordination and cultural marginalisation. He argues that translation is “fundamentally ethnocentric”, and that “the very function of translating is assimilation, the inscription of a foreign text with domestic intelligibilities and interests” (p.11). Later he draws on Berman (1992), who writes of the problems of ethnocentrism and the desirability of preserving “foreignness”: “A bad translation I call the translation which, generally under the guise of transmissibility, carries out a systematic negation of the strangeness of the foreign work” (p.5).

Bucholtz (2000), in her work on the politics of transcription, identifies many important ways in which transcription can demonstrate attitudes towards race, otherness and power, for example. To this I would add that considering the politics of transcription in terms of foreignisation and domestication invites a look at academic discourse in the social sciences and the privileged status of what is generally thought of as “academic” prose over alternative forms of knowing and expression. As Bayne (2006a) argues, the scholarly written text “is still the primary marker of academic legitimacy. The linear, logically-developing scholarly text, with its hierarchical structure and build toward conclusion, is still the primary expression of the academic mind” (p.1). If we consider academic writing as the dominant mode of discourse in the social sciences, then it becomes possible to explore transcription

as an act of either domestication *to* or foreignisation *from* that discursive centre. The question: “can a translator maintain a critical distance from domestic norms without dooming a translation to be dismissed as unreadable?” (Venuti, 1998, p.84) becomes highly relevant to transcription, and indeed helps us to understand some of the discomfort and resistance to more verbatim forms of transcription in academic writing and publishing, which tend to coalesce around objections to the ‘distracting’ nature of such transcription, and to the question of whether certain forms of transcription disadvantage or deprive participants by making their words sound less academic than the prose that surrounds them.

If we attempt to include foreignised transcripts in our analyses and publications, there will inevitably be a strangeness to the texts we produce. The question is, do we do more harm or more good in making our translations and transcriptions visible in this way? As Venuti (1998) asks, “to what extent does such an ethics [of difference] risk unintelligibility, by decentering domestic ideologies, and cultural marginality, by destabilizing the workings of domestic institutions?” (p.84). Foreignisation can render strange and essentially ‘other’ not only the text but also the source culture, thereby inviting a domestic audience to observe at a distance, and to marginalise a foreign culture as hopelessly different and unreachable. There is, in short, a danger that ‘foreignised’ transcribed material in research publications makes data inaccessible, which is far from the goal of most researchers.

Bucholtz (2000) distinguishes between naturalised and denaturalised transcriptions, and, following Ochs, calls for proponents of each style of transcription to “unsettle” and experiment with the other to see what difference it makes, and what they can learn (pp.1461-2). However, sometimes the component parts of the process of translation – the text, or the translator – reveal themselves as being beyond the reach of deliberate experimentation or choice. The effects of the translator and transcriber emerge not only from their conscious strategies, but also from the unconscious assumptions (and errors) they make. Sometimes in translation these assumptions are brought starkly to light by the passage of time or alternative translations; in qualitative research transcription this will rarely if ever be the case. In large part this

is due to the almost ubiquitous commitment to anonymity that researchers make to their interviewees, which make audio or video recordings off-limits to anyone outside the research team. In an important sense, therefore, the transcript, not the recording, becomes the original in a way a translation may not appear to.

Baker (2006) identifies as a key discourse of translation the depiction of translators as “honest and detached brokers who operate largely in the ‘spaces between’ cultures ... who can transcend any cultural or political affiliation, at least while they’re engaged in the highly romanticised task of translating” (p.11). She problematises this discourse, arguing that “no one, translators included, can stand outside or between narratives” (p.12). This echoes the arguments of many qualitative researchers; Oliver, Serovich and Mason (2005), for example, explain that “a transcriber hears the interview through his/her own cultural-linguistic filters” (p.1282). The aim in drawing attention to such ‘meta-narratives’ and their impact should not be to “lament variability” (Bucholtz, 2002, p.785), but to ask (as Bucholtz does) what it might imply.

Sometimes the nature of the text itself makes the translator more visible. Some theorists have argued, in fact, that there will always be inadvertent gain associated with translation, because words always have meanings and associations which differ between languages. Lecercle (1990) calls this gain “the remainder”, and Venuti notes that it “violates ... the ‘virtual reality’ created in the translation ... because the variables it contains can introduce a competing truth or break the realist illusion” (1998, p.22).

Writing around translation and transcription has freed me up to live with the contradictions in my practice, and I have a new goal: to use my transcription practice to trouble and challenge the dominant discourse of academic writing in ways that leave more room for different modes and voices. I want the remainders, the foreignness and the accidents to be front and centre, because I believe that there is value in mess and uncertainty (Law, 2004), and in problematising our reliance on certain forms of academic writing as “stable materialisations of the workings of the

reasoning mind” (Bayne, 2006a, p.1), to the exclusion of all others. Extracts from my data therefore include pauses, laughter and repetitions, and I now offer these as generative disturbances rather than an unproblematic reach towards authenticity.

## Thematic analysis

There are two main approaches to analysing qualitative interview data. One is to treat each interview as a unit of analysis. Many narrative and case study methods take this approach. The other is to look for commonalities – themes – across the interview data and analyse data thematically. Grounded theory and thematic analysis are two methods that approach interview data in this way.

There are problems with both approaches. Treating an interview as a special kind of unit of analysis might be seen to privilege individual ‘voice’, autonomy and subjectivity as if these things were somehow beyond contestation. Looking for and pulling out excerpts from interviews on thematic lines implies that the interview context itself is unimportant, and that ‘experience’ can be abstracted from its production and equated with ‘experience’ from other contexts (Silverman, 2006, p.146).

In my case, I am interested less in the specificity of individual experience than in language and accounts that appeared across a number of interviews, and so I conducted a thematic analysis. I understand this as a method assemblage – Law’s (2004) term for the ways in which we enact “presence, manifest absence, and absence as Otherness” (p.84) in our knowledge-making and research practices. For Law, method assemblages “necessarily craft complexities and simplifications”. Rather than identifying ‘signals’ amongst ‘noise’, we create both the signal and the silence (p.110). Our methods allow us to avoid being “dazzled” by complexity, by foregrounding some things by “very selectively attending to, amplifying, and so manifesting, possible patterns” (*ibid*). Law describes interviews in an ethnographic study he conducted as containing “limitless possible patterns of similarity and difference” (*ibid*), and the process of analysis as necessary reduction, not discovery.

My approach to thematic analysis was similar to that described by King and Horrocks (2010), who define themes as:

recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question. (p.150)

Like Law, they stress that the researcher's vision informs how themes are identified and developed. Themes are not "like a fossil in a rock" (*ibid*, p.149) waiting to be discovered. The successive stages of thematic analysis are, in a sense, the process of fossilising the themes that have been named. For this reason, thematic analysis is open to the same sort of scrutiny, and to questions about validity, as other analytic strategies. This is not a problem, rather it is an opportunity to ask those questions and to consider again and again, as Crotty (1998) puts it, what store we want others to set by our findings (p.41). King and Horrocks (2010) suggest that the key measure of validity for thematic coding is its 'auditability', proposing that researchers should be prepared to show the trail of their successive coding activities so they can demonstrate how themes developed over time (p.152). While I question the emphasis on validity, for reasons I will explain soon, in Appendix C I offer three snapshots of the coding framework I developed, at three different points in the process, and show how an early proposed structure for this thesis was both informed by and informed the coding process. These snapshots are by no means exhaustive, and I did not capture every step of the process, but they should give a sense of how the coding developed alongside the theoretical work I was doing at the same time.

King and Horrocks (*ibid*) also set out three stages of the process of thematic analysis: descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and the generation of overarching themes (p.153). I did not experience the first two stages as discrete, so I am describing them together.

### **Initial coding stages – descriptive and interpretive**

The first stage of my analysis of interview transcripts began with close reading and an initial coding of the data. I chose NVivo as my coding environment primarily



because I had used it on other projects and was familiar with the interface and with the sorts of organisational help it can give in analysing transcripts along thematic lines. Using NVivo I highlighted and coded parts of the interviews that seemed to have something to offer in terms of the matters of interest informing my research, and also excerpts that were surprising, puzzling or thought-provoking, even if the connections with my research questions were not clear.

I began a close reading of each transcript with a ‘blank page’, creating unstructured ‘free nodes’ as I read, based on the specificities of each interview. Some of these were quite descriptive, named with a few key words from the content of the excerpt being coded. Others were more interpretive, trying to describe what the excerpt was ‘about’. So, for example, in one interview a discussion of what a student planned to do with their e-portfolio after graduation might be coded under a free node called “motivation”, while another might be called “continuing professional development”, depending on the focus of that discussion.

King and Horrocks (*ibid*) suggest deliberately reusing nodes where new data fits well, but I chose to create brand new nodes for each interview (even though sometimes these were similar or identical in name to earlier ones). This method of coding was more time consuming than reusing nodes, but it sits well with the semi-structured interview format in that it gave space in my initial readings for different, and perhaps idiosyncratic, ways of framing ideas to emerge as I read each transcript.

After free-node coding each interview, I transferred the nodes into tree nodes, under broad headings of ‘teachers’ and ‘students’. This first stage of coding happened over a period of many months, as I typically coded interview transcripts immediately after transcribing them (or, in later stages, as soon as I got them from the transcriber).

Once all the interviews had been coded in this way, I turned my attention to successive stages of combining nodes. Where nodes were identical or very similar in name to previously created free nodes, I merged these together. Where they seemed

to be addressing a broader overarching point, I created a new node and either merged them into it, or added them as nodes one level down in the hierarchy.

### **Generating overarching themes**

Throughout the process of this doctoral work, the notion of the mask has loomed large. By Spring 2007, the mask genres were starting to emerge in my early writing, spurred on by work I was doing on a separate project looking at digital museum collections. My first year board paper, submitted in February 2008, described the full set of six masks, with what is now ‘discipline’ then being called ‘punishment’. So, by the time my first interviews took place in May 2008, the masks were already an important aspect of my thinking about this research, and I mentioned in my board paper that I hoped to use the masks as a structuring element of the research. To test how this structure might work, I sorted the existing tree nodes into these six headings: performance, trace, disguise, protection, transformation and discipline. The process of doing so developed and refined my thinking about the categories, and resulted in the production of a proposed structure, with a chapter for each mask.

As can be seen from comparing the proposed structure in Appendix C with the descriptions of the chapters I provided in Chapter 1, I generated more data than I have used in this thesis. Some themes, such as blogging and literacies, have been addressed in published papers (see Appendix D). Others, such as disciplinary ways of writing reflectively, are areas which future research, including documentary analysis, might fruitfully address.

### **A post-structuralist paradigm**

In this research I have taken a post-foundational, specifically post-structuralist, theoretical stance. Such a stance has profound implications for the research process, and these are not necessarily apparent from a choice of methods or the planning of a research project. Instead, they inform matters of validity, reflexivity and subjectivity that underpin the vital question for any researcher: “what store are we asking people to set by our research findings?” (Crotty, 1998, p.41).

Texts, in the broadest sense, are the focus of enquiry for post-structuralist researchers. Usher and Edwards (1994) describe post-structuralism in research as:

a way of analysing and asking questions by anyone in *any* field about anything 'textual' both in the narrow conventional sense of written texts and in the much broader sense of any discourses, practices, institutions – in other words, any structure generally which is productive of signification. (p.18)

As we saw in the last chapter, the relationship between power and discourse is mutually constitutive, and focusing on one inevitably entails thinking about the other. Research methods such as interviewing and transcribing produce texts through relations of power that are both intriguing and, especially if unrecognised, problematic. Furthermore, the discourses that govern the processes of research themselves shape and produce particular sorts of outcomes, knowledge and researcher subjectivities. In early parts of this chapter I have been subject to such discourses as I attempted to explain myself as a rigorous, careful, consistent researcher who made plans which sometimes went awry, but never to the detriment of the researched, and never undermining the project of research itself. This explanation should have come, as Scheurich (1997) informs his audience at the start of his book about research in the postmodern, with a 'caveat emptor': "all that follows is never that which it is constructed to appear" (p.1). Researcher subjectivity, like all subject positions, is provisional and discursively constructed:

Contrary to the misunderstanding that 'post-structuralism suggests there is no such thing as truth or reality', what *is* suggested by post-structuralist theory is that 'truth' and 'reality' *do* exist – *because/as we invoke them*. ...our acting, choosing selves exist in so far as we refer to them and socially legitimate them. What post-structuralism maintains is that they exist in our discursive practices, not prior to them. (Jones, 1997, p.268)

How, then, might the project of research, singular, be understood? In educational and social science research, there is what Lather (2006) calls a "paradigm proliferation": a spectrum of sometimes conflicting methods, theoretical perspectives and epistemologies that the new researcher is confronted with and must select from. Nevertheless, the positivist and empiricist legacies of the scientific method from

which social sciences take their name – what Law (2004) names “their basic intuitions” (p.16) – are difficult to shake while still doing something that is generally recognisable as ‘research’: they are “widespread in Euro-American common-sense thinking about science and social science” (*ibid*).

Bayne (2004a), in explaining her own post-structuralist perspective, sets out four assumptions that underpin positivist research paradigms. These are the possibility of: knowable reality, unbiased inquiry, the transparency of language and the autonomous subjectivity of the researcher. She goes on to make a helpful distinction between post-positivist and constructivist research paradigms, which question the first two of these assumptions (p.22), and post-structuralist paradigms, which question all four. In describing how my research should be read as post-structuralist, the remainder of this chapter offers some observations about my own approach to questioning these assumptions.

First, and most important, is the nature of language and its relationship to reality and the self. Davies and Davies (2007) undermine a whole raft of positivist assumptions by claiming that:

the researcher could never be finding out about a preexisting subject who exists independently of the interview or other account making processes. Nor could the subject reflexively examine and tell the researcher about a subject (themselves) who exists elsewhere as an accomplished project who is not, in the very act of telling, both progressing and limiting the unfolding of the self in interaction with the researcher. (p.1143)

Knowledge, subjectivity and language are intimately entwined – not unidirectional, but symbiotic. Much of what follows applies equally to my research perspectives and to my understanding of some of the key issues in reflection and reflective practices.

The post-structuralist subject does not choose from an infinite number of possible selves which identity to perform, and “lives are narratable as coherent in terms of the categories language makes available” (Belsey, 2002, p.51). These categories of coherence map on to embodied situations: gender, race, class, sexuality and

(dis)ability. They also map on to available social discourses and contexts, out of which the subject may construct meaningful identities.

In research terms, a post-structuralist epistemology undermines goals of ‘knowing’ experience. For one thing, as Belsey (1994) argues, experience “does not exist in the raw, in its natural state, outside the order of language and culture... its presence... is an illusion” (p.10). The constitutiveness of language has implications for the role of the researcher, who should be wary of claiming to represent ‘the truth’ of individual experiences, because: ““there is no clear window into the inner life of a person, for any window is always filtered through the glaze of language, signs and the process of signification’ (Denzin 1989:14) ... The researcher’s struggle, then, is not primarily with method” (Clough, 2002, p.85).

If reality, and even human experience, is not ‘knowable’ through observation or through language, then enquiry is always already an interpretation. The questions we ask, the interests that drive us towards those questions, are already saturated with meanings that we cannot divest them of. Practices of reflexivity acknowledge this, and suggest that there is something we can do: we can bring our previously ‘hidden’ interpretations to the surface, we can situate ourselves as researchers in our research. This description of reflexivity sets a great deal of store by the possibility of self-knowledge, and therefore by an assumption about the autonomous subjectivity of the researcher. Indeed, reflexivity is closely aligned with reflection in this respect – it relies on a stable, knowing subject who can say what “is” and “is not” in relation to herself, if not the world.

Reflexivity does something else in relation to knowledge, though – it situates and contextualises it. It explicitly moves knowledge from a state of universality and closure, to one of multiplicity and uncertainty. In a 2006 paper about reflexivity, documentation and augmented reality, Avram discusses an art installation called *Under Scan*, which the artist, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, describes as “a piece about

relating to representation”<sup>12</sup>. The installation involves recorded video ‘portraits’ of people being projected into the shadows of visitors to the installation, and appearing to relate to the visitors by making eye contact, waving and responding through movement. For Avram (2006), even as the visitors’ shadows are “annulled by the video projections”, this “brings another illusion – that of the representation (video image)” (p.4). The extent to which the representation appears to be alive, to have will and responsiveness, is the extent to which the visitor is taken in by the illusion.

*Image from Under Scan installation*<sup>13</sup>



The figure within the shadow in *Under Scan* has been a powerful metaphor for me for what it is that researchers do: we are the shadow-casters, and everything outside our own shadows is invisible to us. In other words: our research necessarily fits into the shape of our shadows. This is both troubling, because there is always so much we will not be able to see, and exciting: as we move, our shadows will create new spaces for new knowledge to fit into.

What does this mean for the nature of interview research? Is there anything ‘real’ in an interview transcript? Was there anything real in the interview to start with? Scheurich (1997) writes critically of what he calls “modernist” approaches to interview data:

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/intermediaart/underscan.htm>, retrieved 21/6/2010.

<sup>13</sup> From East Midlands Development Agency press release, 21/2/2006  
<http://www.emda.org.uk/news/newsreturn.asp?fileno=2963>, retrieved 21/6/2010.

The modernist representation is not sheer fabrication, but all of the juice of the lived experience has been squeezed out, all the ‘intractable uncertainties’ and the unstable ambiguities have been erased. (p.63)

It is possible to be too precious about the purity of our data, to lose awareness that it is a representation, not the ‘real thing’ and, in doing so, produce interpretations that are lifeless because they are so faithful to a certainty which is, above all, constructed. Even researchers who accept the premise that there is no such thing as unbiased enquiry can be subject to the allure of purity. For example, Lather (1991) has argued that “some amount of dialogic encounter [with participants after their initial involvement] is required if we are to invoke the reflexivity needed to protect research from the researcher’s own enthusiasms” (p.64). However, as Scheurich (1997) claims: “techniques like... joint construction... will not lead to a more correct interpretation because... an indeterminate ambiguity, ‘a wild profusion’, lies at the heart of the interview interaction” (p.73).

What is the way forward, then? Watson (2006) offers a lovely metaphor that echoes Scheurich’s complaint about the “juice of lived experience”. Writing of qualitative research transcripts, she says that the transcript “needs to be reconstituted through analysis and bears much the same relationship to the original data as a prune, when rehydrated, does to a plum. But prunes are not necessarily inferior to plums; rather, they do ‘being fruit’ in different ways” (p.374). Research data, in turn, does ‘being fruit’ differently than the situation from which the data emerges. It is not that one is ‘true’ and the others not, but that they belong to different moments. For me, rehydrating the transcript means accepting it as a literary text, and working with it as a creation full of imagery, narrative and contestable meaning. All texts have contexts, so this is not an attempt to force these transcripts into a form of placelessness or universality. Rather, it is to let them out of the trap of authenticity. This is the approach I have taken in writing this thesis.

Our responsibility to our participants is not to tell the truth about their experiences – no such truth exists, or can exist. By the time an academic paper is written, multiple layers of interpretation, representation, reduction and rehydration have been formed.

Writing itself is one such layer – it is a method of inquiry that produces meaning and reality (Richardson, 1994, p.518). Instead, our duty is to generate data ethically by being direct with participants about our objectives; keeping our promises about how we protect and use what we generate; and most importantly, refraining from claiming that our interpretation ‘captures’ their experience. Anything else is:

overlaying indeterminacy with the determinacies of our meaning-making, replacing ambiguities with findings or constructions. When we proceed, then, as if we have ‘found’ or ‘constructed’ the best or the key or the most important interpretation, we are misportraying what has occurred. (Scheurich, 1997, p.73)

There is another responsibility, which is to be curious. Lather (2004) describes a post-foundational methodology of “getting lost”, where “one epistemologically situates oneself as curious and unknowing versus the more typical sort of mastery project” (p.281). Being an ethical researcher in a post-structuralist paradigm means staying with a certain level of discomfort around issues of knowledge and power, while avoiding being immobilised by that discomfort:

There is always more that can be said and more that can be done. To subvert foundations is not to court irrationality and paralysis but to foreground dialogue, practical engagement and a certain kind of self-referentiality. (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p.27)

I have tried to approach this work with curiosity and a willingness to be surprised. I have not always succeeded in making sense of conflicting ideas, but I have tried not to turn away from what has confused me. For example, I was so disconcerted after a day spent with one of my ‘constellations’ that I wrote a fragmented field note to help unpick some of the reactions I was having – the only such piece of writing I did during this phase of research:

*One speaks of boundaries, and I wonder what that means, but don't know how to ask. He turns my questions back on me when he doesn't like them, refuses to draw for me, refuses any possibility of silliness or waste.*



*Another sees this as a way to mitigate uncertainty, talks of the credit crunch, the lack of jobs, the need to know and articulate her worth. No one else will do it for her. Selling herself, being value for money – she is all about the practicalities of being a commodity.*

*They all react with surprise to the idea of putting something personal in these spaces. Yet their relationship with their tutor is the most intimate I have seen. What am I missing?*

The overwhelming sense I was left with here was of not understanding, of missing something important in this situation that did not fit with what I thought I knew about my topic. This kind of writing was not a method I stayed with, but a response to a crisis of understanding, a worried curiosity that I still have not fully resolved. Nevertheless, it has shaped this work and reminded me that uncertainty can be uncomfortable, even painful.

What store, then, do I want readers to set by my findings? My main hope is that they find the stories I am about to tell “good things to think with” (Lather, 2006, p.35). In asking questions that have not been asked yet of emerging pedagogies of reflection, in being curious about what students and teachers said in response, I hope that I have produced a convincing, satisfying and useful case for rethinking high-stakes online reflection.

## **Chapter 4: Performing the reflective self – audience awareness in high-stakes reflection**

As we have seen, the literature on reflection and online reflection is largely silent on the nature of compulsory reflection and its orientation towards external standards and audiences. In constructing reflection as a process that authentically reveals a knowable self, and self-examination and self-development as the ultimate goal of such reflection, those who write about reflection in professional contexts, like Bolton (2005) and Johns (2004), offer a vision which, I will argue in this chapter and throughout this thesis, is unachievable in online high-stakes reflective practice and problematically masks its purposes, nature and potential. Those authors who do specifically address high-stakes reflection in formal educational contexts, on the other hand, have little enthusiasm for the practice. There is therefore a serious gap between theory and practice in this area, leaving teachers who wish or are required to formally assess online reflection with limited sources of support as to how that practice might be dealt with, and even appreciated, on its own terms.

This chapter has two main aims. The first is to explore how students and teachers understand performance in high-stakes reflection. In this respect, the matter of audience awareness is of primary interest. I will ask what audience students believe they are writing for and show that what Hughes and Purnell (2008) call “anxious academic literacy practices of monologic addressivity” (p.151) are following students into reflective practices online. I have identified three types of audience awareness: awareness of the framework of assessment and the high-stakes nature of the online reflection being produced<sup>14</sup>; awareness of a specific audience in the form of the teacher; and awareness of a general Other as audience (which will be taken up in Chapter 5 as well).

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<sup>14</sup> Assessment is an audience in the sense that it is experienced as making certain demands, and as structuring online reflection in very particular ways which are not associated, in the minds of students, specifically with their teachers.

The second aim is to establish high-stakes online reflective practices within a post-foundational framework, focusing on Bakhtin's theories of dialogue and addressivity as a route towards repositioning high-stakes online reflective practices as forms of speech which need not attempt to "hide [their] own mechanisms" (Foucault, 1998, p.86). From a post-foundational position, it is taken as read that, as McKenna (2005) puts it, "relationships between addresser and addressee are inscribed with power dynamics, and that these... have an impact upon what is said or written" (p.92). The literature around reflection is generally not written from such a position, however, so my goal is to unsettle existing discourses and create a space in a reflective practice context where explicitly audience-focused digital performances of self can begin to be seen as possible and even desirable. I take a cue here from Clegg, Hudson and Mitchell's (2005) paper about personalisation, dialogue and new media, which makes the claim that "in conditions where personal reflection is paramount, dialogue becomes even more, not less, important" (p.6). They define reflection as "essentially dialogical" in nature (*ibid*), and make the point that it *increases* the need for "interpersonal awareness and attunement" (p.13).

Bakhtin's ideas about dialogism and speech genres are useful in understanding how it is that students are so audience-focused and aware. Most of Bakhtin's work chronologically pre-dated the post-structuralist writings of Foucault, Derrida and others, but he has been credited with "precociously invent[ing] a post-structuralism" (Pechey, 2007, p.16), and with being at the forefront of the linguistic turn (Bell & Gardner, 1998, p.4). White (1988) maintains that Bakhtin held views that resonated with post-structuralism, including that the text was not closed or fixed; and that meaning is "governed by the constructed context of persons envisaged as speaker, addressee, and subject of statement" (p.228). What is most important for my purposes here is that Bakhtin's theories and post-structuralist theories share, in Pearce's (1994) words: "a newly relational view of language... and a theory of subjectivity that rejects the humanist principles of 'wholeness' and 'autonomy'" (p.9). Pearce goes on to say that Bakhtin's dialogic self resists fragmentation and alienation in a way that is at odds with the postmodern discourses that followed (pp.9-10), but Bakhtin's ideas about addressivity in particular are highly compatible

with the Foucauldian governmentality, power and confession that are of broad overarching concern in this research.

Addressivity is the theory that “in making meaning in language, whether in dialogue with someone else or thinking alone, we are always addressing, explicitly and implicitly, a person or people, a question or comment” (Lillis, 2001, p.43). This is because language is inextricably bound to context, a “territory shared” (Voloshinov, 1973, p.86). It is a social construct that, in turn, constructs the subject as speaker. Holquist (2002) says that an utterance (which can be spoken or written) is a “border phenomenon” which takes place:

between speakers, and is therefore drenched in social factors. This means that the utterance is also on the border between what is said and what is not said, since, as a social phenomenon par excellence, the utterance is shaped by speakers who assume that the values of their particular community are shared, and thus do not need to be spelled out in what they say. (p.61)

Lillis (2001), in her book about student writing, describes the writing ‘voices’ of students as being informed by their multiple identities and experiences. She goes on to point out that student writing is also shaped “by the voices they are attempting to respond to” (p.46). She illustrates this in the context of higher education by describing two levels of addressivity in higher education: “context of culture”, which would include institutional practices, and the way that institutional values and beliefs are understood by students; and “context of situation”, which includes what teachers say, do and provide in written form; and how teachers’ values and beliefs are understood by students (p.47). In online reflective practices, a further level needs to be added, which contains the cultural context of online identity and disclosure, and of blogging in particular (Ross, 2012).

In framing the data in this chapter as examples of ‘performance’, it may seem as though I am interested only in the deliberate strategies employed by students and teachers, the deployment of what Hargreaves (2004) calls “legitimate narratives” of reflection (p.199). Rather, I see this as a route to a broader point. The first step is to demonstrate that students are engaging in strategic, knowing reflective performances

that are orientated in multiple ways, and that currently dominant discourses around reflection are therefore manifestly problematic. The next step is to show why this is not necessarily a problem with the high-stakes nature of the task, but rather with a conception of reflection that avoids dealing with addressivity. All speech has an audience, and a richer and more generative engagement with online reflection would be to work with, rather than ignore, concepts of addressivity, dialogue and performance in high-stakes reflective practices.

### **“I was writing for the person who was going to mark it”: demands of assessment**

This section demonstrates the extent to which students are orientated towards the assessment of their reflections, and how this orientation impacts on the ways in which they, and their teachers, think about and describe their writing. First, it is helpful to provide some context by showing how assessment of reflection can be framed through the assessment criteria and guidance that students are provided with.

The content, timing and extent of assessment varied between the programmes participating in this research. Almost all, however, assessed online reflective writing as developed over time, usually over the whole period of a course, and the material to be assessed was presented in web-based blog or e-portfolio format. In one case, online reflection was expected throughout the course but only assessed as part of written assignments staggered through the course.

The specific assessment criteria as they relate to reflection also varied. Four examples are given in the table below, from across a range of levels and disciplines. The excerpts given here are drawn from longer documents about assessment on given courses, and are the sections that specifically refer to reflection. Some notable features are described in the right-hand column.

## Four examples of assessment criteria for reflection

Excerpts from the assessment criteria	Features of note
<p><i>Excerpt 1: Postgraduate</i></p> <p>Criteria: Some reference in the commentary to every item of evidence that is in the compilation (minimum nine items, maximum fifteen). All four of the areas of competency covered ... All four of the areas of understanding and development covered... Some reference made to the activities and/or opinions of others on the course. ... A coherent story of personal professional development showing the process of development, not just a list of things done on the course... A convincing story of personal professional development, believable and supported by the evidence. ... Appropriate language – markers will look for a personal style and appropriate use of the first person, as well as expression of views, feelings, opinions, etc. personal to the writer. Descriptions and connections – markers will look for descriptions of experiences and events that make connections with the overall story of development that is being told. Analysis – markers will look for a systematic approach to the discussion of evidence and the demonstration of awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses. Change – markers will look for accounts of changes that have been identified as significant to the writer's practice and for the relation of these changes to experiences during [the course]. Proactivity – markers will look for convincing evidence of engagement with the course and its participants that goes beyond satisfying the basic requirements above.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A mix of quantitative measures (“minimum nine”, “all four areas”) and qualitative judgements (“coherent”, “convincing”, “appropriate”).</li> <li>• Some specific information is given about what reflective writing contains: use of the first person; expression of views and feelings; descriptions of experiences; demonstration of awareness of strengths and weaknesses; evidence of development.</li> <li>• The concept of a “story” is repeatedly mentioned, indicating both a crafted or designed process, and an audience. The audience (“markers”) is specifically named and repeatedly referred to.</li> <li>• Despite a comprehensive description of requirements, a final criterion (“proactivity”) requires students to “go beyond” these in some unspecified way.</li> </ul>

<p><i>Excerpt 2: Undergraduate</i>  Description of activity: Try and identify common learning needs across activities ...this may help focus your learning... Consider whether some needs require more attention than others - if so why do [you] think this is so?... Think about what you are doing and why and how well you have done it - areas for improvement? How will this impact on your practise? Any feedback from on your abi[l]ities / perfomance from other student[s] / staff / e-tutors etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong focus on attending to “needs”, self-identified and identified through feedback from others.</li> <li>• Link between learning and practice is given as a question.</li> <li>• Tone is more suggesting and questioning than instructing (“try”, “consider”, “this may help”, “how will this impact?”).</li> <li>• Not clear what the actual criteria for assessment are.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Excerpt 3: Postgraduate</i>  Description of activity: The idea of the [blog] is that you use it as an online reflective diary – a place where you bring together your various threads of investigation and thought. The [blog] is intended to be a record of your thinking and development, not a neatly-finished ‘place of arrival’ – the main requirement is that you use it in an open and reflective way.  Criteria: Does the [blog] demonstrate sustained reflection on the course content and its application for the participant’s professional practice?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No specific guidance about what constitutes reflection, but synthesis, development and openness are noted as desirable.</li> <li>• Reference to the digital (“blog”, “online”).</li> <li>• Relies on the student’s understanding of how to link “course content” and “professional practice” appropriately.</li> <li>• Overall emphasis is on continuity and progress (“sustained”, “record of development”).</li> </ul>
<p><i>Excerpt 4: Undergraduate</i>  Criteria: In order to meet [the] assessment criteria you will need to demonstrate: reflections on ... past performance and self assessment of current learning needs..., a critical evaluation of your performance and the dynamics of group working, role in facilitating problem solving in professional practice, presentation skills... evidence of personal development ...final summary – written as if personal statement for prospective employer.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refers to concepts that are presumably taught in other parts of the course or programme – “critical evaluation”; “facilitating problem solving”.</li> <li>• Performance and “skills” are emphasised over experiences as an appropriate focus for reflection.</li> <li>• An imaginary audience is proposed, in place of the “real” audience of markers: “prospective employer” – orientates reflection towards employment.</li> </ul>

These four excerpts vary in the amount of detail and clarity about the process of reflection that they provide. They all mention the necessity of recording development, and this would seem to be the underpinning purpose of reflective writing in higher education (as we also saw in Chapter 2). How this is to be achieved is less clear in most cases (Excerpt 1 being the most detailed), and students experience the demands of writing for assessment differently depending on their level of confidence in what is required of them.

Where students are clear about assessment criteria, and secure about how they will be applied, the assessment of high-stakes reflection can be seen to be quite straightforward. Eileen had a sense, after two years, of having cracked the formula:

*Jen: You sound like you kind of feel confident that you know what is wanted from you, from having done it two years before?*

*Eileen (student, UG): Oh yeah, I understand what they're looking for.*

*Jen: Yeah.*

*Eileen: Yeah.*

*Jen: What are they looking for?*

*Eileen: What are they looking for? They're looking to show that you've, you've developed and that you recognise that you've developed, so that you can say 'This is where I was and this is the way that I've gone or the paths that I've travelled and the hurdles I've jumped over, to get to where I am now'.*

In articulating the looked-for qualities of her reflection, Eileen knew that the story of development is paramount, that it must include hurdles, choices and journeys, but ultimately must show positive progress. This is the paradoxical nature of compulsory reflection that both Hargreaves (2004) and Macfarlane and Gourlay (2009) address; the strategic practices that academic writing demands construct reflection as a story or a game, even while the content is supposed to be individual and confessional. This is discussed further in Chapters 6 and 7.

Along with the general expectation, set out in all four of the excerpts in the table above, that reflection will tell a story of personal and/or professional development, there are also more specific requirements that shape and define what must be



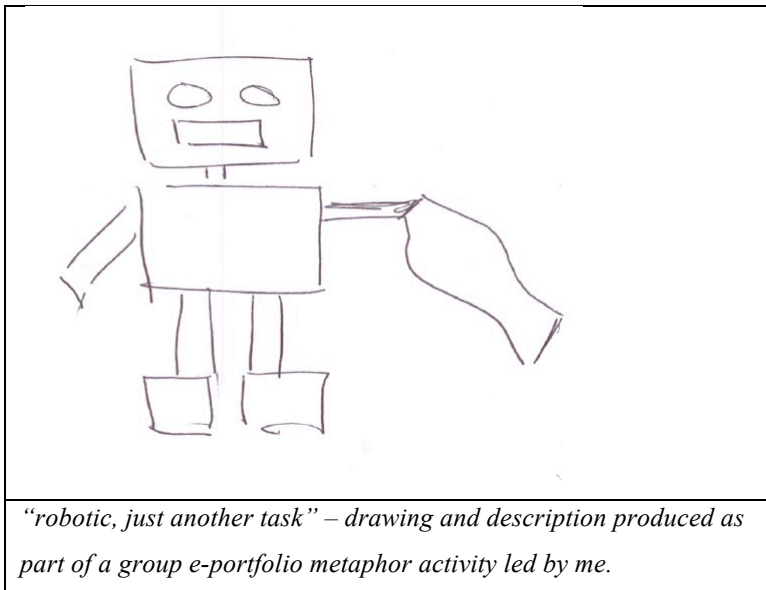
produced. Helen noted that her hierarchy of audience had the marker at the top, with their criteria and structure taking precedence over her own desires:

*I was writing for the person who was going to mark it. Um second to that I was writing for me. ...What I was trying to do was the, um obviously if it if they hadn't have set out the parameters that they'd set out I wouldn't have done it in that way. Cause there was certain headings we had to use and themes we had to follow ...so we had to do it in those in those headings which certainly didn't fit terribly well in a lot of cases with what I wanted to write. (Helen, student, PG)*

Helen depicts an active choice here, a modification of what she wanted to write to fit the 'parameters' set out for her. Beth described experiencing less agency, and no particular sense of a thwarted desire, in her framing of reflection on her course as part of a box-ticking exercise:

*It's another tick box thing for uni, um, simple as. ...I've been on courses before, different ones, and there's always something, there's always tick boxes. There's always things that you feel like's a tick box exercise, there's always something on a course that you feel like 'Do I have to do this?' you know 'What is the point?' it's, um and you have to do it because it's down on the curriculum, that's just what, you just have to do it, there's no point arguing about it. And this is just another thing, um, it's just another thing on another course that they need you to do and you have to do it and, it's as simple as that. (Beth, student, UG)*

Another student in Beth's cohort created this visual representation in response to my request for the group to draw or write their e-portfolio metaphors:

*Metaphor of reflection: the robot*

The e-portfolio is represented as a long scroll or sheet of paper being held by or emerging from the arm of a robot figure. It is not specified if the robot is the student, the teacher, or the computer (or something else), but the caption on the drawing calls the process as a whole ‘robotic, just another task’. The paper is being held at arm’s length, apparently facing outward (though in the representation it is blank). The drawing gives me an impression of distance, detachment and a mechanical approach to a task. This is difficult to reconcile with the lively, personal, and above all *critical* practice that teachers on this programme, including Natalie, were trying to foster through the use of online reflection:

*I think reflective writing helps you as an individual, to begin to put things into perspective. Um, I think it could begin to help you, as an individual, make sense of things. Um, but I also think it could help you in beginning to see a way forward, um, so [pause] but that would be looking at reflective writing in, um, a an analytical critical way. (Natalie, teacher, UG)*

Where Natalie saw individuality, perspective, development and analysis as potential outcomes of the reflective process, Beth, and her fellow student, seem adamant that, in the high-stakes context, it amounted to no more than a “tick box thing for uni”. Natalie herself seemed to recognise this outcome for some students: “some of [the e-portfolios] are amazing, and others I just think ‘You’re just going through the

motions. And you were going through the motions last year and the year before, so actually what have you learnt?’” (Natalie, teacher, UG). There is sometimes a stark contrast between what teachers want from reflection and what students are able or willing to produce for assessment.

Moreover, where students are less clear about what is expected of them, assessment can be seen as fickle or unpredictable. I asked Yvonne if she knew how to do the kind of reflection her teachers wanted, and she replied:

*No not really. With my portfolio I've always kind of, I've never really understand, understood the marking for that, because I've had one year, um, where I hadn't tried all that hard with it and I got a decent mark, and then another year, when I actually tried really hard, I did loads of [reflections] and tried to reflect on lots of things and I didn't do so well that year. So I didn't really understand the whole marking criteria for that or how it worked or anything so that did confuse me. So I'm not too sure how I'll do with this, one that I just sent in. (Yvonne, student, UG)*

Yvonne went on to say that she knows if her reflections are good only after she receives a mark for them. Stewart was less inclined to take his teacher's word for it, instead feeling sure that his work was worth more than the mark he received:

*I did everything from that checklist and I think I got 56, out of 100. And I I was disappointed with that mark but I know personally that the [reflection] pro, [reflection] process is, I mean personally I know I've benefited more than 56 from it. Um and I think, so for me personally I know that there is a discrepancy between the true value to me as a person and what I formally have on my degree, degree classification. (Stewart, student, UG)*

When I asked if he now knew how to get the mark he wanted in future reflective assignments, Stewart said “no”.

In her book on student writing, Lillis (2001) reported exactly the same types of responses from students in relation to writing for assessment. She describes a dominant “practice of mystery” (p.74) surrounding academic essay writing in higher education, and reflective writing is no less mysterious if its strategic nature, audience focus and tacit requirements are not grasped by students. This connects also to the

concept of the “hidden curriculum”, a phrase coined by Jackson in 1968 to describe “the crowds, the praise, and the power that combine to give a distinctive flavor to classroom life” which may conflict with the “official curriculum” (Jackson, 1990, pp.33-4). The hidden curriculum of online reflection in higher education may differ in character from that of the school classroom, but the sense that there are requirements that are not discussed, but form the foundations of successful reflection, is a useful way to understand what goes on in this complex practice.

Having discussed how the process of reflective writing itself is shaped by understandings (or lack of understanding) of assessment criteria, I will now turn to examine the process of preparing and submitting reflection for assessment. Many students and teachers describe the end of the process as the point at which assessment becomes an explicit audience, when they focus on the assessment criteria and review what they have created in preparation for submission. As Beth put it, “I just kind save, save the [items] through the year and then, towards the end, that’s when I kind of titivate it up”. Theresa explained that while her reflections are “shorthand and to the point” when she first writes them, for assessment “it needs to be better”. For some, this also meant ‘tidying’ aspects of the reflections that were seen as unsuitable for assessment:

*It’s picking out the bits that are relevant to what what you need to show really. ...Much more structured, not so much waffle! I found, with [non-assessed reflective] blogs, you can tend to get a bit carried away, can’t you. You sort of start writing something and then you take, it’s a bit like a thought process you you tend to sort of go off the tangent a little bit and then come back to say ‘oh, that, anyway’, and there’s a lot of, um, that sort of language in it ‘Anyway, must get back to the point, anyway mustn’t..’ ...That, that was more how I found it, more like talking than writing. But yes, it did change for assessment, because it had to be more structured. (Hazel, student, PG)*

Students felt they should do things with their reflections before submitting them for assessment even when the same tutors were involved in both formative feedback aspects of reflective practice and the assessment of the reflections. Changes were

sometimes seen as necessary even if they meant removing material that showed humour and individuality:

*One of the presentations [a student] gave to the other group about his his e-portfolio, he'd actually found a clip on youtube, which was a Walt Disney, Donald Duck clip ...and he actually included this clip in his e-portfolio, well I mean it was a hoot, you know. Um, I mean he took it out [laugh] for the actual assessment. (Peter, teacher, UG)*

Although it is not necessarily clear from the transcript, Peter's tone here suggested that it was obvious that such material would not be suitable for an assessed reflective piece in his discipline, though he did not go on to explain why that was.

The endpoint of assessment is central to most students', and some teachers', approach to the task of online reflection. Bob was matter-of-fact about what his students are required to do, and where their concerns naturally lie. It is the summative, not the reflective, nature of the portfolio task that carries the day:

*Jen: Do you think that, um, students kind of enjoy doing reflection, and enjoy doing their portfolios?*  
*Bob (teacher, PG): Eh, [laughs], I think, probably, the better question here is do they enjoy doing summatively assessed work? ...we try to, to look upon the use of e-portfol-, use of e-portfolios, not as just a summatively assessed, eh, tool, but as a formative assessed, formatively assessment tool, i.e. assessment is for learning. ... once they get, get rid of the fear aspect 'oh, bloody hell, it's not, this is all to do with summative assessment', and then they do enjoy it a bit more. But, always, at the back of their mind, is this notion of 'we'll still have to get this right, because, at the end of the day, it's a kind of pass or fail situation'.*

Bob saw his role as helping students "get rid of the fear aspect", rather than acknowledging and working with the contradictions and implications of high-stakes reflection. We will also see teachers taking on this reassuring role in the next chapter looking at digital traces. As with the trace, reassuring students may not be the most useful approach to high-stakes online reflection, as it creates more reasons for both students and teachers to adopt performance as disguise, rather than in more creative, generative modes.

Whatever teachers say, marks matter greatly to students, and shape their choices in complex and sometimes counterintuitive ways. Alex, for example, discussed choosing not to edit his reflections at all because, he explained, he thought it would demonstrate his journey better, both for himself reading it back, and for his assessor:

*I didn't think that assessment wise it would benefit from [editing] cause I thought that it, that the assessment would probably include whether there was a journey as well, well maybe not directly but I think, it wasn't being assessed as a finished work, it was being assessed as a diary, my reflective work, so it doesn't really make sense to edit what you thought at the time cause that's still valid. (Alex, student, PG)*

Stewart articulated a tension he experienced between making his own judgements and producing work of value to him, and “pleasing the tutor”, as he put it:

*I care for my final degree classification and really I would want to get the highest mark possible I suppose by pleasing the tutor, but at the same time... I know that I have benefited ...so I know that I've got the best of both worlds, although I do ultimately care about my degree classification. (Stewart, student, UG)*

For Hazel, aiming for a distinction was the driving force behind her willingness to devote a lot of time to ‘picking apart’ her reflective writing:

*I ended up putting myself under an awful lot of pressure to try and get a distinction... I did pick it apart, you know, really carefully to make sure I was doing what, what [the instructions] said. (Hazel, student, PG)*

Again, it is not unexpected that students are concerned about their marks and make strategic decisions to attempt to do well in assessment terms. What is quite challenging is that those decisions often move students away from the stated ethos of reflective practice (as differently articulated on different programmes, but having some features in common, as we have seen). On Mona’s programme, for example, peer sharing of portfolios and reflections was actively promoted as an important part of the learning process. Mona described the peer sharing elements as problematic because there was a concern that peers would use creative elements of her portfolio as “inspiration”, as she put it: “it’s hard work, so ...you want to get credit for what

you, if you've done something better than others" (Mona, student, PG). We discussed the complexity of this, with Mona explaining that she was uneasy about it even though she knew getting ideas from peers should be encouraged, that it wasn't plagiarism, and that the credit would come from being reflective about the material being developed. I mentioned that in a web format the structure and content of reflection could be made creative with the use of video, for example, and that this could potentially differentiate one portfolio from others. Mona replied energetically:

*That's a good one though, yes. Because, yeah, we've been told to link into videos if you want to, but then you, you've got to pick the right one, and, and then, seeing it somewhere else might not be, you know, used by someone else it's difficult to say who was first.... Eh, so nobody's going to get the credit... [laughs] So a good tip is to leave it to the last minute!*  
(Mona, student, PG)

Mona knew that she should be understanding these sharing practices as beneficial, and that her personal reflections would be the basis upon which she was assessed. The web format in particular, though, allows creative expression of individuality, and it was not clear to Mona that this individuality shouldn't, or didn't, 'count' in assessment terms. Her half-serious conclusion was that what might be seen as poor time management could actually be a strategic, protective move aimed at keeping good ideas fresh and getting credit for them. How some other strategies for reflection work as 'protection' will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

At the extreme end of this strategic practice, Wendy gave two examples of students who had been caught plagiarising their reflective writing. In one instance, a student copied reflections from his girlfriend, who had taken the same course the year before. In the other, two students had submitted virtually identical reflective statements in the same year (one having previously helped the other edit their work). In disregarding the core principle of reflective writing – that it *reflects* an individual's learning – these students show that a completely impersonal approach to assessed reflection is possible. Reflective writing is like any other kind of academic writing in this sense; those who are willing or desperate enough can find ways to 'cheat' the system. Of course such cheating is undoubtedly rare. The broader point is

that a reflective performance need have little or no relation to a “personal-confessional” (Bleakley, 2000) self. Or it may, as in Alex’s case, mean choosing to *perform* an authentic journey. For many students, perhaps most, a high-stakes reflective performance will have elements of disguise and protection woven in. What separates a ‘good’ performance from a ‘bad’ one is the seamlessness or invisibility of those elements, not their absence. Assessment produces strategic performance, so assessed reflection produces strategic performances of various kinds – all the more varied and strategic because, arguably unlike traditional academic writing, they are supposed to hide their own mechanisms. The discourses of reflection described in Chapter 2 do not allow for the performance, or the sorts of sophisticated literacy practices that students engage in, to be acknowledged, explored, played with or pushed at. This produces anxiety, uncertainty and calculation, which affects not only students’ orientation towards assessment, but also towards their relationships with their teachers.

### **“Didn’t I make more impression than that?”: teacher as audience**

The individual personalities and preferences of teachers come into play in students’ accounts of their reflective writing. Kate was criticised by a tutor in an early (summatively assessed) reflective account for being too negative, and changed her approach considerably in response, even though she did not agree with the tutor’s interpretation of the assessment criteria, and felt she had to ‘sell’ a false vision of herself:

*When it came to my final reflection, I made sure it was positive the way through. I wasn’t going to write anything that might have been too much of a weakness or anything, cause I didn’t want to make that mistake again! So I was being influenced by the way the previous one had been marked. ...I felt as though I was trying to sell my development and prove that I had developed massively when, perhaps, I hadn’t. And I think it would be just as valuable for me to say ‘this particular thing, I haven’t developed very well, because, but this is how I could develop it’ and that’s how I understood reflective writing to be. (Kate, student, PG)*



Rachel (student, UG) understood that different teachers she wrote for had different opinions about reflection, and discussed with me which ones were very enthusiastic, which ones disliked the technology, and so on. Josie explained how writing for a series of three different tutors affected her reflection:

*Different tutors, you see, have different expectations as well, which is quite difficult. ...what one tutor was looking for, wasn't what somebody else was looking for. ... So it was quite difficult at times to, 'Okay, so who am I writing to today, cause that's what they like?' [laugh] (Josie, student, PG)*

She went on to explain that there were some tutors for whom it was appropriate to write personal reflections, but others would not welcome these. As she put it, “you choose the people you say that to”. Josie took on board the feedback she received from each of these tutors, and used it to inform her subsequent reflective entries. She recognised that her reflections were not straightforwardly authentic accounts, but were shaped according to her audience.

The teacher in their role as mentor or assessor of reflective writing was also recognised, by both students and teachers, as potentially vulnerable to implied or explicit criticism of their teaching. Eileen thought teachers might not be able to help responding negatively to critical reflections on the nature of their courses:

*Students in our year might have um written reflections about, if, say, the timetable was a bit messed up at one point, or if they weren't happy with a certain area, area of, the way that, um, the teaching was delivered, they might have written quite a critical reflection of that and, yeah, that, that might be taken personally, actually by the module leaders. I'd I'd like to think that they wouldn't do that, but nobody likes criticism, do they? (Eileen, student, UG)*

Ian confirmed, from a teacher's perspective, that students' reflective writing can sometimes make teachers feel criticised, and expressed a worry that this could affect their assessment:

*It's a very real issue of the tendency, when you're marking something, if you're marking some, somebody who's being upbeat and positive and saying 'Yeah, the course worked well, I did well, I felt good'. You've a*

*tendency to feel good about that and give them good marks. Versus the tendency to somebody who's being very critical and saying they didn't really get anything out of the course and this is the reason why, and what, blah, blah blah – you give them not so good marks because they leave you feeling a bit depressed. (Ian, teacher, PG)*

There is arguably no such thing as 'impartial' assessment, but what is different about assessing reflection is that the material being marked can relate explicitly to teachers' own choices and practices. Students are aware of the human being performing the teacher's role, and are careful not to bruise the human ego that very often wields the power of assessment.

It can be difficult to disentangle concerns about assessment from other sorts of awareness of the teacher as audience, but on several of the programmes in my study, students received written formative feedback in the form of comments on their blogs or e-portfolios during their course(s), separate from the summative assessment that generally came at the end of a course or semester. Sometimes these comments could come from peers, but most often their ongoing reflections were only accessible to their teachers, who could access the reflections at any time, without asking or having to leave a trace to alert the student of their presence. Teachers only left a trace when they chose to comment, and these comments could come fairly regularly, very sporadically, or, in one case in particular, only in response to specific student requests for engagement and feedback. In these situations, where the teacher may, at any point, speak back in response to student reflections, silence becomes synonymous with absence for some students:

*If you were if you were speaking your blog to a person and they nodded, that would at least give you some indication that they were present. Um whereas if you're writing a blog and you get nothing back [pause] it's like you've spoken into a vacuum. (Alex, student, PG)*

Beth described being unsure whether her writing was being seen or not:

*If there's no message returned, obviously, I've, I don't know whether [my tutor's] looked or anything. (Beth, student, UG)*

Student reaction to this silence can be quite extreme:

*This kind of kind of dependency like one gets hooked on cigarettes or something [laughter], one kind of gets hooked on the tutor and thought, you know, 'oh, why is she taking so long to mark this?', you know 'why aren't I getting any feedback now?', and it wasn't long at all! ... 'oh, she's forgotten about me, oh that's a real shame'. 'Oh, didn't I make more impression than that?' [laugh] (Charles, student, PG)*

Curtain (2004, online) characterises the primary emotion of the blogger as one of anxiety, in terms that very closely echo Charles' reaction above:

Anxiety may be the primary emotion associated with giving accounts of blogging, and perhaps of blogging itself — Do I updated [sic] enough? Why don't I write? Who is reading me? Why aren't there more? What do they think about what I say? Have I said enough about enough?

This anxiety is tied most closely to fears of not being visible, and Mallan (2009, online) argues that it is part and parcel of the construction of “shifting subject positions” online:

These subject positions are not just ontological states, but inevitably entail a politics of visibility, both at the personal level and at the level of technological infrastructure. It is this ‘visibility’ which gives rise to epithets of narcissism and susceptibility.

To be responded to is to know one is seen. Where an audience could, but doesn't, respond, the result, as for Charles, can be disorientating and distracting from the stated purpose of the reflective task, causing students to focus instead on what might get their audience's attention. Even when students were aware of teachers' time constraints and knew that their silence was very likely not personal, some were negatively affected by this space of possibility that was not realised:

*We were told 'share this item with your tutor, share this with your tutor' and you ex-, I think it said 'your tutor's not obliged to, um, respond to these'. So then you think well, if you're sharing them, you know, what else do you expect? ...I mean, I know they have a lot of people to tutor, but it would, yeah, I think I would have preferred more [comments] than, than I had received. (Kate, student, PG)*

Kate's assumption that a requirement to share, on her part, should be met by an obligation on the teacher's part to respond, exposes a tension which seems to be inherent in high-stakes reflective practices online: teachers and course developers design an element of surveillance and compulsion into reflective tasks to ensure that students engage in them, but are unable to give enough feedback to make students feel like their time and effort has been fully appreciated, and that they have been heard and responded to as individuals. This matters especially in these sorts of practices because they ask students to be very personal, and to reflect on matters of professional and academic significance, and students therefore want a personal response. Where reflection constitutes a large percentage of marks for a course or programme (50% was the maximum for any of the courses in this study), students can shore themselves up to wait for that reward. In some cases, though, the mismatch can lead to feelings of bitterness or anxiety, and a disengagement from the process.

Other students, like Lynne, creatively constructed tutor *presence* from silence, rather than assuming absence, and proceeded *as if* their reflections are being read even if they did not know for sure. Lynne described her teacher's perceived presence as motivating:

*Jen: Did you feel like [your tutor] was reading everything you were writing, did you?*

*Lynne (student, PG): I, I chose to believe that she was reading it. [laughter]*

*Jen: Okay. And did that help to motivate you?*

*Lynne: That was definitely motivating. Yeah. Yeah definitely.*

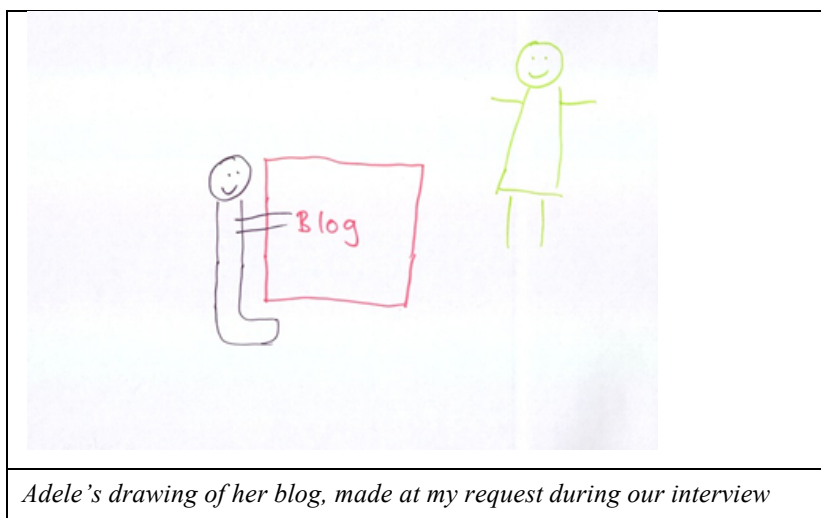
Lynne made her own supporting structure, through the figure of the teacher, to help her stay focused and on task. I will discuss elements of surveillance in more detail in later chapters, but the point Lynne makes here relates to performance because it demonstrates that her teacher was a notional audience *even when silent*. Nothing that Lynne wrote was out of bounds for the gaze of her tutor; her perceived presence was at the heart of Lynne's writing.

Adele made a related comment, describing online reflection as much like offline writing in that “once you’ve submitted it you’ve submitted it you can’t change it again”. In effect, for Adele, her teacher’s gaze fixed her reflective writing and made it complete. I followed up on this, pointing out that technically the online work could be edited, but Adele replied:

*Once [my tutor’s] read it there’s no point editing it, because, because, yeah maybe in that, you were asking me about ownership, maybe in that sense it’s not really mine because, um, I did feel once she’s read it then, um, there’s no point ...in changing it again. (Adele, student, PG)*

For Adele, there was no longer any work to be done on her reflective writing once it had been seen by her teacher in a formative capacity; the audience was presented with the writing, and once presented, the writing was no longer available as a work in progress. Her visual representation of herself and her tutor in relation to her blog shows the relationship as Adele perceived it:

#### *Metaphor of reflection: teacher presence*



Adele is represented as the seated figure, while her tutor is the figure in green. Adele depicted the blog as a large sheet of paper, explaining that it was “more normal” for her to think of it that way – a matter I will discuss in the next chapter. She explained that her tutor is “not in connection with um it but she’s sort of standing over it [laugh] I do feel that a bit”. Both figures are smiling, but the configuration looks

much like a classroom, with a teacher standing over a student, who is sitting down and working. The student figure is in the process of writing, while the teacher appears to be observing. The process of writing apparently includes the (silent) presence of the teacher. For Adele, and other students, this presence may have been motivating, but it was also seen as constraining, as the next section will show.

Students discussed being careful in a number of ways about how they presented themselves in their online reflection. There is always the question of what should not be said, as we will see, and about how to put a best face forward. What Lynne and Adele say here goes beyond caution, though, to an implicit Other to whom their words are spoken. The influence that teachers can have in these reflective practice contexts is considerable, especially online, where their panoptic gaze is much more strongly felt because they truly can observe unseen. This general, unseen Other plays a powerful role in shaping students' reflections.

### **“You’re never going to be quite as honest”: awareness of the Other**

Students see what they are doing in their online reflections as something akin to a performance, and themselves as performers, in a broader sense than the individual teacher or the assessment requirements I have already discussed. For some students, writing for any audience at all results in a perceived loss of honesty or openness: “you’re never going to be quite as honest as you are if nobody’s going to read it” (Adele, student, PG).

Adele seemed to understand ‘honesty’ as a spectrum of possibility, with full honesty dependent on total privacy, and only partial honesty possible in any context in which she knows somebody (anybody) will read her words. This is at odds with the literature on reflective writing which claims that reflective writing can be a method of ‘capture’ of experience (Moon, 1999a, p.31), and it begins to suggest that capture is entirely the wrong metaphor when choice and deliberation goes into the making of the reflection. It also suggests that Adele saw an internal or self-directed monologue as the ideal in reflection, perhaps in a similar way to what Fendler (2003) describes

as a cultural feminist position, where “some inner self remains untouched by social domination and exempt from the effects of existing power relations” (p.20). Such an idealising of the inner self is so central to the idea of reflection that it can be difficult for students and teachers to work creatively and critically with issues of audience in reflective writing. The notion of authenticity is disturbed by an explicit recognition of addressivity, and other values and theoretical frameworks are not on offer. This leads to complicated contortions as students attempt to reconcile the requirement to be honest with other, less ‘acceptable’ concerns around convincing and pleasing an audience.

Hazel explained the change in her writing when she realised that a blog she had thought was completely private was in fact available for other students on her course to view:

*Probably [it became] less honest. Obviously, sort of looking at the language that you use. I maybe, eh, wouldn't, you know, if I was getting a bit frustrated or, um, concerned about something, maybe use different language than I might have done if I was writing my own diary which nobody could see. ... and not sort of naming names ... think that was something because, um, it would be too, not trying to rub people up the wrong way really. (Hazel, student, PG)*

The change Hazel described seems to be aimed at maintaining face and good social or working relationships with her course peers, by performing a self through her reflective writing who did not show frustration, pettiness or belligerence (qualities which she was concerned were coming through in her ‘honest’ reflections prior to realising others on her course could read her blog). Put another way, Hazel’s performance was one of politeness and non-confrontation.

This is slightly different from, but related to, a thread that ran through some students’ accounts about the nature of writing for an academic audience. This was concerned with writing ‘properly’, paying attention to the formal features of grammar and spelling:

*The fact that somebody was reading it meant that I, I tried to be articulate, you know I tried to write it properly I suppose. (Lynne, student, PG)*

This emerged also in the section about assessment, but here Lynne's 'somebody', an audience in the abstract, was what provokes her to write 'properly'. Finally, there was awareness of the importance of the visual and design aspects of online reflective spaces, where the use of visual enhancements was described as being for the benefit of an audience:

*Um [pause] the, the colour and the graphics, that comes in and the end. That's ...the icing of the cake, isn't it? ...it is really really important, I think, because... if you're reading a lot of information and, certainly, things, such as reflection and action plans, I think that the colours there detract from the monotony. (Eileen, student, UG)*

The 'you' here is the audience for Eileen's portfolio, and Eileen is showing a level of awareness and concern about their experience of reading her work online; she wanted it not to be boring, and crafted a visual element to entice and engage her audience. Importantly, this visual element of her portfolio was produced at the end of the process. It was not part of her own evolving understanding of the material, but was decoration, dressing up her portfolio for the audience's benefit. Eileen saw the textual nature of the reflections as 'monotonous', and took steps to keep her audience engaged.

All three of these features – a perceived loss of honesty; a concern with 'proper' writing; and strategies designed to attract and entertain the audience – are central elements of the experience of writing reflectively, and are given very little attention in the literature around these practices. These are seen by students as a consequence of having *any* audience at all, not a particular teacher, or a particular assessment framework. What students are talking about, and in some cases misunderstanding, can helpfully be related more to the nature of language than to the specifics of high-stakes reflection. In the final part of this chapter, I return to the concept of addressivity, and propose it as a way of working with audience, performance and assessment in reflective practices online.



## Addressivity and the place of the Other: restaging performance

This chapter has demonstrated that students do experience their high-stakes online reflection in terms of audience and performance. They are able to articulate their orientation not only towards assessment, as might perhaps be expected, but towards their teacher(s) in particular, and an audience in general. The question is, what (if anything) do their teachers, and should we, make of this? Does it matter if reflection is being approached in this way? Is the performance more than a pretence that no one acknowledges? What outcomes could emerge from such practices if they were more critical and creative about their relation to audience?

It may be more appropriate to work *with* the addressivity of online reflection, than to ignore it and leave students to deal unsupported with conflicting messages about authenticity and audience. Bakhtin (1986) discusses the “nuances of style” that differ according to the “personal proximity of the addressee to the speaker” (p.96). He describes intimate genres, which are produced in an “atmosphere of profound trust” in the addressee’s “sympathy, sensitivity, and goodwill” (p.97). This is the genre of writing that reflection is designed to foster, where the presence of the facilitator (in this case, the teacher) is “to create a climate of trust and safety in which confessions can be made and catharsis enhanced” (Bleakley, 2000, p.14). As Bakhtin puts it, “intimate genres and styles are based on a maximum internal proximity of the speaker and addressee (in extreme instances, as if they had merged)” (1986, p.97). However, this is not the kind of writing that students *can* produce, because even where compulsory reflection produces apparent revelations of interiority, these are “products of the genre itself, where identities are constructed through confessional modes, rather than confessional modes revealing identities” (Bleakley, 2000, p.16). There is no ‘there’ there, in other words; when teachers say they want expressions of authentic selves, they are asking for a performance. The result of denying the performative nature of reflective writing is writing which is:

starved of its possibilities, anaesthetised or dulled, unable to find a plurality of aesthetic voices through metaphor, image, allegory; and unable

to exercise itself as a dialogic imagination that would offer a world-orientation and communal practice. (p.19)

In fact, what students will produce in the absence of strategies for working with performance may be more like what Bakhtin (1986) terms “objectively neutral” genres – which “presuppose something like a... unity of viewpoints, but this identity and unity are purchased at the price of almost complete forfeiture of expression” (p.98). These could take the form of conventional modes of academic writing that students will adopt by ‘default’ (see Chapter 8 for more on this), or the “legitimate narratives” that Hargreaves (2004) describes (which will be discussed further in Chapter 7).

Some of the teachers I spoke with frame their assessment practice in ways that could complement an addressive approach to reflective writing, though they do so ambivalently. Penny, in our discussion of how to do well in assessed reflection, introduced the idea of “enculturating” her students into writing reflectively. This enculturation is related to, but different from, the analysis of ‘disciplining’ reflective writing that will come in Chapter 8. For Penny, many of the dilemmas students have with high-stakes reflection are part of a process of induction into a specific “writing culture”, with its own particular norms and structures:

*Jen: So you think, for the reflective assignments, it's more important to be able to kind of, um... structure it well and follow the instructions, than it is to be experienced and reflecting for example?*

*Penny (teacher, PG): It's a, it's an assessment. Yeah, that's what you do with assessments!*

*Jen: [Laughs]*

*Penny: ... But they have, they have to be enculturated [pause] and, because these are criterion referenced assessments, um, they have to meet the criteria.*

*Jen: When you say 'enculturated'*

*Penny: Mhmm, into the writing culture.*

While Penny appeared to view this enculturation as a legitimate goal (perhaps *the* legitimate goal) of high-stakes reflective practice, she went on to note that it is largely a tacit one on her course. “That’s what you do with assessments” is

understood as both a frustrating truth and an obvious one. It is not always clear to students, however, as we have seen, that they are being asked to engage with a genre of writing, or what the genre entails. To make things more clear runs a risk that both Jane and Ian pointed out: that of making reflection, and teachers' response to it, instrumental and "not very human", as Jane put it. For Jane, the reason for being so explicit about the nature of the assessment aligns well with Penny's comment about a writing culture, and with the more decisive approach to performance that I am proposing:

*I certainly don't believe you know in, that there's an essential kind of self or an essential identity that they're expressing unproblematically in the weblog. They're constructing... an idea of themselves through their reflective writing about the content of the course. Um, and I think it's really important that they, that they know on what basis that is going to be assessed. So when students ask 'am I doing this right?', I always refer back to the assessment criteria... that might seem a bit sort of instrumental and not very kind of, human [laugh], but I think it's the only fair way to do it. (Jane, teacher, PG)*

Ian observed that the risk of some students taking an instrumental approach to their reflection is "the price you pay" for being explicit about the assessment criteria, but that he had been criticised by students and colleagues for taking this approach:

*[One student said] that it was a bit like doing it by numbers, you know. It wasn't really reflection, because you had to do this and you had to do that, and you had to mention this and you had to mention that and so. And, um, I've certainly had, um, I've certainly had this approach criticised by people from, you know, from other discipline areas in other universities in, in conferences where I've been talking, you know, or where people have been talking about reflection. And if you talk to people who do kind of creative reflective writing, you know, they think this is awful what we do, it's terrible. (Ian, teacher, PG)*

Both are concerned about being seen to respond inhumanly to student reflections, but they are more concerned to deal fairly with students by making it plain how their reflections connect up with the high-stakes requirements of their courses. Jane saw reflection as a student's construction of an idea of themselves, not an expression of an essential, autonomous identity, and tried to make her assessment practices support

that *constructing*, not *revealing*, task. In that distinction is an opening to a way of thinking about reflection that sits more easily with assessment, and within the digital. It leaves room for an understanding of power, of addressivity and of flexibility of identity work. The construction of an identity is always a performance, as Adele pointed out:

*The blog, obviously you're trying to um portray yourself in a positive light um because it's up for assessment and everything, and um, yes as I say before you're maybe not always totally honest because you you wouldn't write anything too negative or too critical in it but, um, but I don't have the feeling that it's, that I put on a different identity for it... I never had the feeling that I was making this up... It is, it is, maybe it is still a performance but in the way, in a way that, you're always performing somehow ...I think identity is made up of so many shades and it's, you can't really say the one is your true identity and the other one isn't. (Adele, student, PG)*

While Adele laughingly said that “you’re always performing somehow”, she was also at pains to make me aware of her sincerity within her reflective blog: “I never had the feeling that I was making this up”. At present students feel they must be seen, above all, to be authentic in their reflections, and this, paradoxically, is hampering their understanding of and engagement with a challenging mode of writing. If explicitly offered the online reflective space as a space of construction, experimentation and refinement – as a challenge to situate themselves as academic and professional actors within a particular assessment framework – the need for a strategic, performative approach could be less confusing, and more rewarding for students.

The mask as artefact of performance has something to offer here. The theatrical mask is both a demanding and a freeing element of performance. Actors must be taught to be expressive using masks, and it is a difficult discipline which some dislike (Griffiths, 1998, p.37). On the other hand, the mask can make it easier to play a role and to be subtle in conveying thought and emotion to an audience (Wilsher, 2007, p.31). And theatrical masks can give performances “expressive power and imaginative life” (Emigh, 1996, p.xvii).

*Image of a masked performance*



15

This expressive power is what Bleakley (2000) wants in a “therapy of writing” (as opposed to writing as therapy): a contrast to the “puritan forms [which] are purposefully devoid of surprise, indeterminacy, invention, imagination, florid excess, disturbance, or ‘story’” (p.19). Ian suggests that his more explicit practices around assessment of reflection are producing “puritan forms”, but perhaps being explicit is just the start of the process. The next step is to show students how to construct, how to perform, a reflective self. In online practices, an important aspect of this is the webness or digitality of the construction, and it is to this aspect that we turn next, to explore the database and the trace.

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<sup>15</sup> Creative Commons licensed work by Giant Gingko,  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/giantgingko/162974551/>

## Chapter 5: The database, the non-origin, and the trace

The previous chapter focused on the nature of high-stakes reflective practice and on reflective writing as an audience-focused mode of writing. It pointed to aspects of performance which are mediated and intensified by technology, including the presentation of digital reflections, and experiences of collaboration and silence. This chapter looks in more detail at the effects of the digital, and in particular the digital database, on reflective practices. Most technologies for reflective practice employed in higher education use databases as building blocks, either within larger institutional structures of VLEs, or as part of portfolio archives, or as searchable, taggable blogs. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the database is an archive which is complex in its relation to subjectivity. This chapter focuses on what the digital database does: its persistence, its flow and permeable boundaries, the kinds of subjectivity it produces. The aim is to show that although mediation *through* technology matters, what I am calling ‘webness’ itself has its own effects and consequences for online reflective practices.

As a structuring metaphor, the mask as *trace* will be applied here. The trace is the death mask as archive, record, remains. A death mask constitutes a material trace or archive of the person who has died. It is not *for*, it does not belong *to*, the person it represents, and nor does that person have any say or control over the matter, making this genre of mask an interesting route to exploring agency and archive in online reflective practices. The death mask is also something other than the singular archived image of the remembered dead. Death masks were not always precise impressions of their source; they sometimes had eyelashes and hair attached to them, and the eyes were sometimes changed “to make it appear as though the subject were alive” (*death mask*, 2010). Such masks have sometimes also been art objects with no definite connection to the once-living, most famously in the case of L’inconnue de la Seine, supposedly a mask of an unknown woman who was found floating in the river Seine. Multiple copies of this mask were created and hung in artists’ and writers’ homes across Europe, inspiring many new literary and artistic works. The

circumstances and date of the creation of the mask itself are unknown, however, and one story has it that the so-called death mask was produced in a German plaster cast factory, the image of the manufacturer's (living) daughter (Zeidler, 2005). Its origin is therefore a profound, unsolvable mystery. The unknown woman (a mystery herself) is not really the 'source' or essence of the mask, and the story told of it is not the source either. Its source is overdetermined, and the replication of the mask and its story only appears to settle what is ultimately not possible to settle.

*Death mask: L'inconnue de la Seine*



A virtual death mask is produced every time we act online. Something is left behind that is us, but not us. The database structure produces and works with traces, through categorisation, identification, sorting, storage and reconfigurability. As we saw in Chapter 2, it produces 'databased selves', or 'dividuals' that are part of our online subjectivity. Land and Bayne (2002, online) have argued in relation to VLEs that "archival fixity and retrievability" binds students to the words and actions of their online past, and Kimball (2005) considers this to be potentially antithetical to the supposedly learner-centred pedagogies which underpin much reflective practice, discouraging students from taking risks, experimenting, or expressing uncertainty (p.454). In what follows, I present some evidence that supports Kimball's position, and some that would seem to ask for a theory of the trace that leaves more space for

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<sup>16</sup> L'Inconnue de la Seine: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inconnue.jpg>. Retrieved 6/8/11.

creative possibility – the possibility of a trace as a marker of what has never been – the non-origin, in Derrida's terms.

For Derrida (1997), the trace as non-origin is the impossibility of ever grasping an 'original' sense of things: "the trace is not only the disappearance of origin... it means that the origin did not ever disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which then becomes the origin of the origin" (p.61). There is no essence or 'reality' that is "not already ...the trace of a trace" (Riddel, 1976, p.586). As such, Sedgwick (2001) says that Derrida's trace is "the very process of signification", and that it "indicates a fundamental possibility of repetition... that is inherent in the production of meaning" (p.207).

Derrida's (1995) essay about the archive offers further clues to the way the trace functions in a digital context. He suggests that "archival technology" determines not only the way in which events and data are *recorded*, but the way in which they are *produced*: "what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way" (p.18). He uses Freudian psychoanalytic theory to link the instinct to preserve through the archive with the "death drive", the "anarchivic", because the archive replaces human memory with a trace of memory. Its entire purpose is to exteriorise, to become a prosthetic:

If there is no archive without consignment in an *external place* which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, or reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. (pp.11-12)

The archive is therefore held in constant tension between creation and destruction. This has implications not only for data, but also for the subject. Poster (1996) reminds us that databases are forms of discourse (p.278), "inscribing symbolic traces" (p.283) and constituting the subject as highly unstable:

Through the database alone, the subject has been multiplied and decentred, capable of being acted upon by computers at many social locations without



the least awareness by the individual concerned yet just as surely as if the individual were present somehow inside the computer. (p.286)

This constitution is “a complex configuration of unconsciousness, indirection, automation, and absent-mindedness” (p.288). Neither the creator of the database (portfolio, blog software, search engine) nor the individual represented in it are fully in control of what happens in the database. The issue of control is of particular relevance to the teachers and students I spoke with.

In the rest of this chapter I explore how aspects of the digital trace – control, boundaries, absences and foundations – are explained and understood by teachers and students in relation to their online reflective practices. In doing so, I explore the argument that archival fixity entraps students in unhelpful ways, and look to a more expansive and generative view of the digital database as offered by Derrida’s theory of the trace. If there is no origin, no original source of meaning, as Derrida claims, perhaps the database offers the possibility of a meaning making and a pedagogy, including one of assessment, that does not fear a loss of control but instead celebrates mystery, disaggregation and replication. The conclusion of this chapter asks where online reflective practice needs to go in order to access such a possibility, drawing on Bayne’s (2010) and Edwards’ (2010) notions of posthuman pedagogy as provocative theories to think with.

### **“It might disappear onto the internet at any time”: being in and out of control**

The context of writing reflectively *online* is different from other forms of reflective writing, with different sorts of implications for the identities of student-writers and teacher-readers. One aim of my empirical research was to find out how students and teachers deal with webness, and the concept of archival fixity, as it relates to their own, or their students’ disclosure or reflection. I hypothesised that students may strongly resist a loss of control in the online reflective environment, because the digital space seems to threaten them with fragmentation (Bayne, 2005) when they know they are supposed to present a coherent self. I imagined therefore that students

would be strategic and selective about what material went into the online reflective space, that they would seek to avoid risk and uncertainty, as we have seen Kimball (2005) suggest. And indeed, this is one – but not the only – way that students described their approach to reflecting online. I thought that, in contrast, teachers would encourage students to feel safe and to trust the system, to elicit spontaneity and authenticity in reflections. Again, this was some teachers' approach, but the range of other perspectives was striking. Strategies for dealing with the online nature of online reflection for teachers *and* students include denial, caution, and consent, as well as rejection. Through many of these strategies runs a narrative of control: imagining it, keeping it, losing it.

For some, a willingness to disclose or confess in these online spaces was dependent on a belief in the spaces themselves as private and safe. This belief can require some deft manoeuvring. Natalie explained that, in her students' place, she would consciously choose not to think about her portfolio as being on the web:

*Natalie (teacher, UG): If it was me in their shoes, I don't think I would particularly think about it being online. I would think about it in a way that I would think about word processing something.*

*Jen: Right, you don't think there's any difference between writing it in a like a Word document or something?*

*Natalie: [pause] I think, if it were me, that's the way I would have to think about it in the beginning, until I got used to using it.*

Natalie's clarification leaves open the possibility that the online nature of the portfolio could be thought about later on, but 'getting used to' the environment will first require denial of that nature. Some students appeared to approach their reflective spaces in exactly that way, choosing trust over a critical engagement with the context of their reflective practice, even in circumstances which would seem likely to cultivate mistrust. For Eileen and Yvonne, students of Natalie's who were in a campus-based cohort together, a technical glitch in the privacy controls in their portfolios resulted in an event which they both told me about, in our discussion of the privacy of their reflections:

*Jen: Do you have a feeling ...of the e-portfolio being on the internet, like, in the way that, you know, a website is on the internet or anything?*

*Eileen (student, UG): No.*

*Jen: No. Why?*

*Eileen: Um, because, because it's, um, because you're logging in and because it's through the university, so I don't worry about that. Um, I mean, yeah, people in my year have had really odd things happen where, suddenly, they've received somebody's [items], and so they've got, like, another 100 [items] put into their, um, [portfolio].*

*Jen: Whoa!*

*Eileen: And it belongs to somebody else.*

*Jen: Whoa [laughs].*

*Eileen: But, you know, no, that, that doesn't worry me at all.*

Yvonne told me the same story, and when I asked if she felt that her portfolio was on the web in the way that other things are on the web, she replied:

*Yvonne (student, UG): It seems kind of safer. Like, when you think about things going on the web, you think about everyone being able to see it and things. But, um, I don't know, it's just because the uni's given it us I presume it's safe and that no-one can hack into it or anything like that, not that there's anything interesting in there for them to read anyway, but*

*Jen: Yeah okay, that's interesting. Even though you've had a, bad experiences of things not being where they should be, or going somewhere they shouldn't be, it still feels kind of*

*Yvonne: Yeah, yeah. I don't think they'd go too far. I think maybe they get sent to other, like, my peers that are in my year and things like that, but I can't see it being, like, spread to the whole world.*

Despite something happening with their portfolios that was definitely not supposed to, neither Eileen nor Yvonne translated this into a worry about their portfolios possibly ending up outside the confines of their institution. Rather than considering their webness, they instead considered their provenance, imagining their origins not in the web, but in and of their university.

Other students acknowledged the webness of their reflective spaces, but developed strategies to help them avoid losing control of their message online until they felt they had perfected it:

*It felt safer writing it in a Word document first... There's something about writing directly you know into an online format whatever that is more*

*[pause] live I suppose... I need to be absolutely sure that what I'm writing is what I want to write because it might it might disappear onto the internet at any time, you know? [laugh] (Lynne, student, PG)*

Because it felt risky and “live”, Lynne put off her engagement with the online reflective space so that she entered it only when she was sure of what she wanted to say. Her cautious approach would seem to support Kimball’s (2005) worry that the database-driven nature of e-portfolios would cause students to back away from a spontaneous, authentic process of reflection; the need to be “absolutely sure” does not sit easily with such spontaneity. Beth, a student on a campus-based programme, had a similar fear of losing her work to the wider internet, and she gave this as the reason she would not communicate unhappiness about a course or lecturer in her (non-public) e-portfolio; because it would then be “floating around in this virtual, you know, this void somewhere [laughs]” (Beth, student, UG). This use of language is revealing: a dangerous void was perceived by some even in the safety of digital ‘walled gardens’.

Megan, on the other hand, took a very different approach, claiming to be aware and accepting of the nature of the digital archive, and choosing to be there fully, with nothing to hide. Much of our interview was taken up with discussions of her various online presences, and her attitude to her private course blog was that she would have preferred it to be public:

*There's nothing that I've expressed in any part of the course that I would mind being public. Uh, but I'm quite mouthy at work ... I don't really mind what's recorded as me having said cause it's nothing that I wouldn't say anyway. And I don't know if other people sort of it looked at that in a different way, if they were expressing stuff they wouldn't normally express at work or they wouldn't normally express in whatever context, so. (Megan, student, PG)*

Megan’s choice (or perhaps her privilege), to live an online life that she saw as completely in harmony with her offline life and her professional identity as an opinionated, honest, ‘mouthy’ person, is a conscious one; she went on to describe being aware of the possibility of being called to account for her online words.

However, she did not seem to experience this as inhibiting in the way that Kimball suggests. Instead, she felt she was in control of her message, her persona, to such an extent that inhibition was not necessary.

## **“It does have to be policed”: privacy, confidentiality and disclosure**

Dyson (1998) predicted more than a decade ago that being online will reconfigure what privacy and display mean, and how they are experienced:

As people feel more secure in general on the Net, they will become accustomed to seeing their words recorded and replayed. They will no longer feel uncomfortable being on display, since everyone around them is on display too... Everyone has personal preferences for privacy, but they are influenced by the surrounding culture and by the surrounding economy. (p.275)

Recent work on youth social media practices has revealed that privacy remains important, even to the so-called ‘net generation’. In digitally-mediated spaces, however, privacy changes to denote the ability to “limit access through social conventions” (boyd, 2008, p.131). Here, tactics such as “security through obscurity” replace structural boundaries (p.133). These tactics make people more vulnerable to changes in the way archives are constructed and surfaced. Boyd uses the introduction of the Facebook news feed as an example of such a change. The news feed, she argues, dramatically changed the social dynamics of the popular social networking site, such that content that was formerly obscure and available only to those who deliberately navigated to a user’s Facebook profile was made available to all of their Facebook contacts in an aggregated feed which became the Facebook home page:

By aggregating social information and broadcasting it, News Feeds takes what people can access and places it at the forefront of their attention. ... [Privacy] is about how people experience their relationship with others and with information. Privacy is a sense of control over information, the context where sharing takes place, and the audience who can gain access. (boyd, 2006, p.18)

Web users have become more aware in recent years of the ways in which changes to context can affect them, and those students and teachers who have concerns about who may be watching, and how much disclosure is too much, sometimes react by rejecting the notion of putting something personal or controversial in their reflective space in the first place, or of allowing or encouraging students to do so.

Sam, a teacher whose students have the option (but are not required) to create their portfolios in the open web, actively discouraged disclosure of what she called the “darker parts” of reflection: “they have to have confidence that [pause] what they put in those portfolios is confidential. Unless they choose to publish it. And I try to discourage publication of the darker parts” (Sam, teacher, UG). In addition, she described the risk of exposure online, whether emotional or in terms of identity disclosure, as one that could be entered into without students’ realisation, and took great care to monitor her students’ digital output:

*I had a guy come to see me yesterday with a [public web] portfolio... and I just said to him ‘look, you’ve given up enough information here if someone really wants to, to claim your identity’ and he said to me ‘what do you mean?’ and I said ‘name, address, date of birth, family name’ and he went ‘oooh my god’ and [I] said ‘so can you take that down off your [portfolio] now, can you sort it out’, and I and we went through various documents that were on there to do with his portfolio and I said ‘I’d like that off, I’d like that off, I’d like that off and I’d’ and it was ‘no no you’ll mark me down’ and I said ‘no I won’t. I won’t mark you down.’ (Sam, teacher, UG)*

Although Sam believed she conveyed her concerns about privacy to her students, the student she discusses here was under the impression that he was required to make these disclosures, and feared being penalised when it came to assessment if he did not. I believe his reaction is not a simple misunderstanding, but an indication of the complex, and perhaps sometimes contradictory, attitudes towards online reflection that teachers communicate to their students.

To illustrate this further, here is a quote from Bob, a teacher whose postgraduate students undertook professional placements as part of their studies. Bob told me that students understood the concept of confidentiality and anonymising information they

put in their online reflections, but had to be ‘policed’ to ensure they adhered to the guidelines:

*While they’re out on placement, we actively encourage them to talk about different aspects of their placement. Now, if they’re not getting on with their [placement colleagues], whilst they’re out on placement, and they start to decry [a colleague], or, for that matter, they start to, to be too critical, in relation to the [organisation], then we, we try to step in to, to alleviate that situation as quickly as possible. In other words, anonymity is, is asked for in that kind of situation. But, because the students are used to using the wikis and the discussion forums themselves, it’s inevitable sometimes that, they don’t adhere to that, so it does have to be policed. (Bob, teacher, PG)*

Bob described anonymity in a way that seems to mean more than simply removing identifying details; students were stopped from expressing negative views about their placements or colleagues. In the context of his programme, this likely relates to the fact that students used their portfolios later for professional validation, and their reflections may be easily linked with their placement records. The potential use of reflective data to make negative professional judgments about students was one that Bob, as a teacher, believed he had a responsibility to shield students from.

Bob identified his students’ familiarity with other online spaces, which presumably did not have the same injunction against negativity associated with them, as the reason why they did not always follow the guidelines for anonymity in their reflections. However, it seems at least as likely that the line between what is desired by teachers, and what is forbidden, is open to misinterpretation by students. Students must “talk about different aspects of their placement”, but not “be too critical”. They must not publish “the darker parts”, but they are assessed on their written reflections. The culture of high-stakes online reflection is one of policed boundaries, drawn and redrawn to attempt to keep control of traces which are always escaping, always vulnerable, always free to do later mischief, or have mischief done to them.

Some teachers and students believe that the consequences of disclosure could be grave. Jess, another teacher, talked about being alarmed by a story she heard from a student, and used the rhetoric of “big brother” to explain her concerns:

*I did have a student who, um, quite, quite scared me actually, in a way, because she was saying that, um, she didn't, um, wish to actually be involved in the course blog ... because she was aware that her employers had googled her previously and had actually, you know, picked up what she was doing in her in her own blog. ...And I thought 'Oh wow, big brother watching you, sort of thing' and that's quite extensive. But, you know, given all this stuff about, you know, what the government is doing about tracking our telephone calls and emails and all this sort of stuff, I mean, it makes you think doesn't it? ... And if they've exposed themselves, if you like, their personal sort of thoughts, innermost thoughts, uh, even if they're professional ones, um, you know, is it is it something that's going to be, you know, sort of used against them on another course or, indeed, you know, more broadly than that? (Jess, teacher, PG)*

Jess believed that even professionally orientated reflections could be personally exposing. Unlike Sam and Bob, this did not cause her to police her students' reflective outputs, but she worried, not only about her students' employers and future teachers, but also about a government which might take an interest in disclosures that appear in online reflective practice contexts. Teachers can be in a difficult position: bringing up their concerns too explicitly or too often could damage students' confidence in their reflective spaces, and make them less likely to be spontaneous and emotionally engaged in 'authentic' reflection. To get the results they want from online reflection, teachers need to make students feel safe, even if this means ignoring or discounting thorny issues that come with doing this work online (as we saw Natalie do when she suggested students should think of their online reflection as being offline). Perhaps partly for this reason, some teachers prioritised reassuring students over engaging deeply with issues of concern to students:

*Students raised [privacy concerns] quite a lot about their portfolio. And, at the beginning, I mean, you had to reassure them that nobody else had access to your portfolio, um, your portfolio repository I'm talking about. What they then compile out of it for presentation is up to them. (Ian, teacher, PG)*

Some teachers, like Peter, described online reflective spaces as more private and secure than their offline counterparts, glossing over concerns that might specifically attend the digital:



*It's not like everybody's reading their blog or their e-portfolio, there there's a maximum only of four people. ...what happens with the paper portfolios is that they're just available and people come in and dip into all of them. With this [online] system ...we actually had to give individual permission to the person who was just going to read that portfolio and they didn't have access to the other ones. (Peter, teacher, UG)*

Some students were nervous, though, and responded by refusing to allow what they saw as personal into their online reflections. In my interview with Dave, he described the profound impact that his course of study was having on him personally and professionally. When it came to his e-portfolio, however, he was reluctant to write plainly about these experiences, choosing instead to code them in a way that he said he would later recognise, but that would not be obvious to anyone else. I asked why he was not more explicit about what he called “the depths of his soul”:

*Because you're not quite sure who's going to be reading it, or because [pause] and what I was writing in in the blog was honest I just, you know I just wasn't going to you know go in to the depths. (Dave, student, UG)*

Sometimes students' views about safety and risk evolved, and they came to regret what they previously disclosed:

*The first entry I was maybe, that was when I was writing quite a lot about my concerns and then um I was sort of writing, I think I, I wrote that 'I'm not quite sure that this course is really what I want to be doing' and um that it's sort of taking the right, right direction and things like that, and I felt afterwards that maybe that was being too open, I wished I hadn't written that. (Adele, student, PG)*

Much has been written about the moral panics surrounding internet safety and risk, especially in relation to young people (Carrington, 2007; Hope, 2008). The result is an undercurrent of fear, danger and caution which is certainly affecting how students and teachers approach their own online reflective practices, and the notion of online presence in general. For example, talking in the abstract about the potential of future ‘portfolios for life’, one student, Hazel, saw benefits:

*The idea of of somebody being able to have this e-portfolio and take it with them throughout their schooling and then into high school and then university and on into the workplace, it's a great idea. Obviously the issues of connectivity and, um, that sort of thing but, um, yeah, I could see the potential for it, certainly. (Hazel, student, PG)*

Helen, on the other, hand, saw the same possibility as extremely problematic:

*I don't trust anybody with data these days. Especially not the government, yeah... it could have huge stakes. I mean the kids have to do their personal statements for UCAS online which they do don't they now? Yeah and submit an e-portfolio as well. And, you know, that's life changing decisions. It doesn't matter much for me but that is, you know, at that point. And then when they leave University, if that's available to all these employers who are going to recruit them, again that's life changing. So um there are some big issues. (Helen, student, PG)*

Helen, a mature student established in her career, did not believe she would personally be disadvantaged by the increasing availability and persistence of digital reflections, but felt sorry for younger people whose life choices and chances would be shaped by the compulsory online reflection they were required to undertake from a young age, and for high-stakes purposes.

Though reflective practice is sometimes said to be about critical thinking, this *kind* of critical thinking is directly at odds with other foundations of reflective practice, which rely on personal disclosure for the development of independence and creative exploration (Creme, 2005, p.289). It is difficult (though perhaps not impossible, as will be discussed in Chapter 9) to square risk and fear with creative exploration. The archive is both a threat and an ambiguity, and this is reflected in uncertainty over the matter of ownership, which I asked students about in relation to their online reflections.

### **“It’s a bit like driving somebody else’s car”: ownership and the archive**

The uncertainty that students expressed about the ownership of their reflective spaces, and the reasons they gave for this, are highly relevant to an understanding of

the trace. In their answers to the question of ownership, we can see the effects of the webness of these reflections most explicitly, and here students were also most likely to recognize the problematic nature of the archive. Eileen, for example, described working with her e-portfolio as “a bit like driving somebody else’s car”, and this description – of an object borrowed, whose functional properties are fixed and which will eventually have to be returned – indicates a rather sophisticated understanding of web-based tools and services. Rachel, whose programme used an e-portfolio tool called PebblePad, explained the stages she went through in considering the question of ownership:

*Jen: Who do you think kind of owns your portfolio space?*

*Rachel (student, UG): [pause] Well, I used to think it was me! And I think, really, it's this PebblePad character, because [laughs] they're going to sort of, I think, I believe, you have to pay for it after you finish the course... or it just gets left. But, in the end, you could print it all out, but I would have thought, you know, it's protected and no-one can get in to see it, or it just gets all [pause] deleted or they save a copy at the uni, I don't know really. I think probably that, you know, this, eh, whoever set this thing up owns it and then, eh, it's all my work, isn't it, but, you know.*

Rachel explained that the content of the portfolio is “all my work, isn’t it”, and this is presumably why she used to think she owned her portfolio space, but she came to believe that it was not the only factor at play. She jokingly referred to the software company as “this PebblePad character”, and suggested that they “really” own it, because they would charge her for continued access to it once she graduates. She knew she could print or download the content of the portfolio, but was not so sure what would happen to the web-based version should she choose not to pay. She assumed that PebblePad would either delete it or continue to store it securely, perhaps also giving a copy to her University. She thought that the University’s stake in the portfolio might mean they had a right to a copy, perhaps including content that she created but did not initially share, because the portfolio was created under their auspices.

Lynne's initial response to who owned her blog was so definite that I moved on quite quickly to a follow up question. She interrupted me to modify her initial certainty, though:

*Jen: Who, who do you feel owns your blog?*

*Lynne (student, PG): [pause] I feel that I own it. Yeah. Definitely, yeah.*

*Jen: And, um, what do you expect to...*

*Lynne: I suppose I feel that I own it but I don't, I don't feel that I own the you know [laughingly] the technology that publishes it. ...because it's sitting on um [the web site], I suppose I feel I own it but I've um, I've given some permissions away.*

Finally, Mona turned the question back on me, rather anxiously:

*Jen: After you finish this year ...what do you think is going to happen to your portfolio?*

*Mona (student, PG): Oh, I don't know, actually, I never thought of that. I hope they hide it carefully, but... probably not! Uh, do you know what happens? I don't know.*

## **The deconstruction of presence: the promise of the trace**

Deconstruction of presence accomplishes itself through the deconstruction of consciousness, and therefore through the irreducible notion of the trace (Derrida, 1997, p.70)

In Chapter 2, I remarked that in light of the challenge to autonomy and authenticity produced by the database, it was necessary for us to think carefully about what it is that we are compelling and assessing in online reflection. It cannot really be “an expression of a subject” (Poster, 1996, p.280): so what is it about, and for? Derrida (1997) explains the trace as playfully present/absent (p.71), and this is what online, compulsory reflection needs to take more account of – the database as itself, not a representation that needs to be harnessed and controlled. The trace offers us an idea to help us move beyond the need for students and teachers to deny, fear, bully or disown webness before they can engage in online reflection. What if online reflective practices deliberately set out to deal in fragments and fictions, and to reframe

themselves as places where many voices are possible and welcome? Postmodern educational theory provides us with a model for this, as Yancey (2004) points out:

Making sense of ...representation of student work requires multiple contexts, fluidity, plurality. Or: in a postmodern world, what in earlier times might have been regarded as fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity are understood today as necessary virtues. (pp.739-40)

Yancey asks us to acknowledge the “multiple contexts” from which student writing emerges, and notes that these are particularly evident in a portfolio (p.741). For Cousin (2005), a similar concern with multiplicity energises her adoption of the metaphor of the rhizome, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, to invite new imaginings of online learning environments. The challenge to authorship that the rhizome offers up, in its heterogeneity and deterritorialisation, is one that reflective practice has yet to really approach, attached as it is to the autonomous, authentic self. Engaging with the webness of reflective practice online can loosen some of those attachments enough to free up ‘openings’ for different sorts of reflections that: “support the shift from traditional anxious academic literacy practices of monologic addressivity to a more fluid and exciting literacy ‘infidelity’ allowing for increasing dialogue and exchange within student groups” (Hughes & Purnell, 2008, p.151).

Looking at the web as a whole and guessing about its near-future shape, the database contains not just human activity, but also the contributions of objects. Bleecker (2006) refers to what he calls ‘blogjects’– objects that can contribute information about themselves to the network, and interpret and work with the information other blogjects provide. The human and the non-human will saturate each other in these posthuman networks and their archives, in what Edwards (2010) calls “entanglements”. For Edwards, an energising vision of education is one of “responsible experimental gatherings of things that matter” (p.15). Online reflection can be in and of this vision, but only if it is prepared to tell a different kind of story, not about itself as it never was, but about its context, and the nature of meaning:

Meaning is always differential and deferred, never present as an original unity, always already a site of proliferating possibilities that can be

activated in diverse ways by the receivers of an utterance, and that therefore exceed the control of individual users. (Venuti, 2003, online)

These proliferating possibilities are received and endlessly reconfigured by the database.

Calling on Pitt and Britzman's (2003) categories of "lovely knowledge" and "difficult knowledge", Lather (2003) deems loss and mourning of "that which we think we cannot think without" as "the force of learning":

This is mourning not as consolation but as a tracing of loss that doubly affirms: both the loss and the still yet of the yes. ... ["Lovely knowledge"] reinforces what we think we want from what we find and [difficult knowledge] is knowledge that induces breakdowns in representing experience. Here accepting loss becomes the very force of learning and what one loves "when lovely knowledge is lost" is the promise of thinking and doing otherwise. Such thinking is within and against Enlightenment categories of voice, identity, agency and experience. (p.12)

The trace is both within and against these same categories, and it holds the same promise of difficult openings and affirmations. Bayne (2010) writes of the promise of "working creatively with the fragmented, spectral texts and presences which constitute the network" by consciously exploring "different modes of disaggregation and re-aggregation online" (p.10), and the delight, liveliness and exhilaration that can come along with a truly digital sensibility. Online reflection can and should produce such exhilaration. To do so, though, it must first grapple with the rituals of confession and compliance that it currently produces, through surveillance and discourses of development. The next chapter constructs a critical vision of what online reflection currently is and does, through the metaphor of the mask as disguise.



## Chapter 6: Reflection as disguise – confession, surveillance and governmentality

The previous two chapters introduced some key tensions around audience and webness that are described by students and teachers in my research, and suggested that denial of addressivity and digitality is producing unnecessarily cautious “practices of mystery” (Lillis, 2001) around reflection. This chapter takes more of these local and specific accounts and puts them in the broader discursive context in which high-stakes online reflection in higher education is situated. It takes up Foucauldian understandings of power, confession and surveillance, first described in Chapter 2, and argues that a humanist discourse of individual development, authenticity and visibility is masking, or disguising, the governmentality of reflection.

Most commonly, disguises are understood as concealing a truth with a falsehood. The metaphor of the mask as disguise is common throughout art, literature and public discourse. Confessional practices are particularly sophisticated, though: they use a mask of truth, of deepest truth revealed through confession, so effectively that, as Foucault (1998) says, “we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us”:

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, “demands” only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place. (p.60)

Confessional practices reorient and deflect relations of power and governmentality so that *failing* to produce the mask becomes the marker of disguise and inauthenticity. Where a disguising mask often indicates its own falsehood, confession-as-mask is a doubled disguise: it is an absence of truth disguised by the appearance of complete truth.



Reflective educational practices have always demanded confession as a certain kind of story about the self. The rhetoric of reflective practice is powerful, as Edwards and Nicoll (2006) put it:

not in the sense of whether it is literally true, but in the ways in which it is persuasive and the work it attempts to do. In other words, reflective practice is not simply a concept, but is a speech act within a contemporary discourse... and, as such, it does not simply describe but is also performative. (p.123)

Performative rhetorical strategies position confession through reflection as a route to self development, and as a means of revealing an authentic self, “the subject as the originary authenticating source that knows itself by being present to itself and through not being touched by others” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p.246). In contrast, Foucault theorised confession as a mechanism of social control which “constitutes the confessant as a ‘describable object’ which may then be arranged according to standards of normality” (Tell, 2007, p.10).

Foucault’s theories have been applied to many kinds of educational practices, including reflection and e-learning, over many years. However, high-stakes online reflection is a context that brings issues of surveillance, confession, authenticity and development together in a new way. This chapter situates reflective practice as one of the points through which the obligation to confess is relayed, and the workings of power, surveillance and self regulation are explored and illustrated with data from my interviews. Reflection is never ‘authentic’, as we will see, and its practices of normalisation are particularly problematic where authenticity is demanded and closely monitored through techniques of surveillance, as is the case with high-stakes online reflection. I conclude by proposing how surveillance and authenticity can be reworked as sites of resistance to the normative discourses of reflection.

## **“Do you feel that those feelings get in the way?”: confession as a route to development**

As we saw in Chapter 2, neo-liberal governmentality de-centres power and makes individuals responsible for their own development and surveillance, a task they willingly participate in because their identity as citizens has been “manifested through the free exercise of personal choice among a variety of marketed options” (Rose, 1999, p.230). Usher and Edwards (1994) argue that these marketed options include “democratic participation” and “personal empowerment” (p.29). In the UK, one key method of “personal empowerment” emerging in a higher education context is personal development planning, or PDP (sometimes called ‘professional development planning’ in disciplines with a professional orientation). Development, personal and professional, is a duty that the good student (and the good academic) will embrace (Clegg, 2004; Edwards & Nicoll, 2006; McWilliam, 2002). Development in this sense is understood as a requirement of living in a world of constant change:

Change is said to be everywhere and we are urged to be prepared to deal with the uncertainties it engenders. ...The fact of change is positioned in the attempt to persuade us, the audience, of the need for change ourselves. Change is represented as the reality to which we must adapt. (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006, p.118)

In other words, personal change and ‘growth’ is a necessary response to external change and uncertainty. The flexible, adaptable, responsive individual is highly prized in a world where technical-rational modes of learning are thought to be insufficient to ensure the relevance and prestige of the professional role (Schön, 1991).

Reflection, as the means by which the individual surfaces and discloses the self that is to be worked upon and to be made adaptable, flexible and responsive, is seen as an essential component of most personal and professional development practices.

Reflection is therefore not positioned as a luxury or an indulgence: it is a responsibility that would-be professionals cannot ignore. In this sense (and in others,

as we will see), it is a normative practice, part of the shaping of professional identity that students in professional and vocational programmes are subject to. This will be discussed more in Chapter 8. Normativity is the way in which:

rules and procedures formalised in the outer social and cultural life are reproduced in psychological life as a regulative self-discipline, thus paradoxically maintaining the status quo. (Bleakley, 1999, p.320)

When reflection is high-stakes, it is normative by definition, given weight by the use of assessment criteria, professional standards and more general competences (for example, “graduate attributes” (Barrie, 2004)) to judge students’ reflections (formatively or summatively). Usher and Edwards (1994), taking a Foucauldian perspective, describe such development practices as techniques of panoptic surveillance, disguised by apparent objectivity:

Learners ‘know’ what they have to demonstrate and can assess themselves as they move towards that goal. In operating within a discourse of competence, learners themselves become the subjects of their own surveillance; like the prisoners in the cells of the panopticon they sit in judgement upon themselves. (p.110)

Standards, criteria and competences configure reflection as a method by which “the normalising gaze is internalised and turned upon the self, as reflection becomes self-measurement and self-evaluation” (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006, p.128). This self-measurement, which might otherwise be inaccessible to the gaze of the teacher, is made perpetually visible by online reflective practices:

*Overall I would say [the reflective portfolio] definitely definitely has helped the students develop. Most definitely. ...as a tutor you can't really see your students developing as such. You get to meet with them once a month ...but you get to meet with them for an hour? Something like that. You don't develop the relationship that the e-portfolio has allowed us to develop. (Maria, teacher, UG)*

Maria completely aligned her ability to see what students are doing, with their own development: the e-portfolio is first described not as helping *her* to see more, but rather as helping *them* to develop. When she says “you can’t really see your students

developing as such”, she meant that they *were* developing outside the limits of her ability to see it in ‘real time’, but she also suggests that her gaze improved the level and quality of their development. Foucault (2005) argues that the reader or listener of a confession is an essential component in the process of truth-telling: “the kinds of speech dragged, extorted, or extracted from [the person being guided], or provoked in him through the dialogue or the diatribe, are basically ways of showing that the truth exists wholly and solely in the master’s discourse” (p.366). As Devas (2004) puts it, “the power of the confessional resides with the listener, who lays down what can be said, what counts as knowledge” (p.39).

This is illustrated by a story Peter told me about a student whose reflective writing revealed some bias against a particular group of people she was required to work with on placement. He described this as being strongly at odds with the ‘politically correct’ ethos of his discipline, but thought that it was beneficial for the student to confess these prejudices:

*Peter (teacher, UG): I think that was a, I think that was a was a positive, in the sense that it was out there and then you could work with it. And the [tutor] worked with that. Because she had access to that material she actually worked with that and said ‘well okay, you know, this is happening. Ah, you know, you know it’s good that you’re able to express these feelings but, you know, do you feel that that those feelings get in the way of your being able to work?’ ... and the student was then able to move on from that. Whereas, you know the [tutor] may well basically have struggled to get any indication about how that how that student was feeling had had the student not been able to write that down...*

*Jen: yeah, so did the [tutor] feel by the end of that process that the student had, had moved on from that from that position?*

*Peter: yes, yes definitely.*

Here the tutor’s access is constructed as a precursor to intervention or manipulation (“working with”). The student, in confessing this ‘truth’ about herself in her reflective writing, opened herself up to such intervention, but there is little to suggest what actions she took in response. The tutor’s question, “do you feel that those feelings get in the way of your being able to work?”, is rhetorical: there is only one correct response. The only power of the person in the confessional, as Foucault

(2005) explains, is to confess, to tell the truth about themselves (pp.364-5). So: the magic happens, the student “moves on”. The tutor’s ability to know and “work with” the material of confession is constructed as more important in Peter’s story than the student’s action (whatever it was) in “moving on”.

Howley and Hartnett (1992), describing processes of faculty evaluation in higher education, point out that such evaluation “excludes the subject from judging his or her own revelations. [It] requires interpretation and judgment by others, without any meaningful opportunity for active participation by the subject” (p.281). The same processes can be seen at work in high-stakes, summatively assessed reflection, as we saw in Chapter 4 where students described not knowing if their reflections were right until they saw what mark they had received for them.

The role of the confessor is even important in seeing and knowing what the student him- or herself does not, as Maria explained:

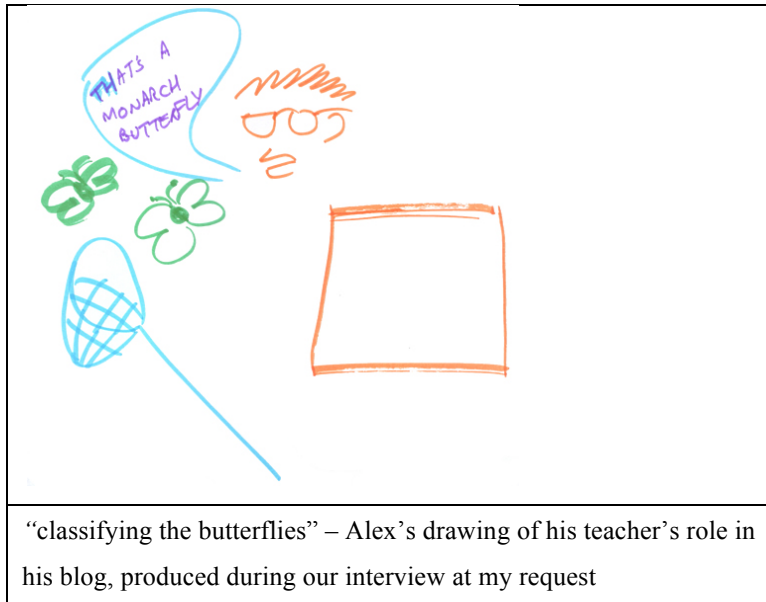
*If you start with exactly where they’re at and try to help them to develop and if you still don’t achieve it, you know, then [laughingly] maybe you need to think about different career options.... Um but at least you’ve tried to do it from, you know, their initial base. ...the student that went away and cried ...we realised where she was at um you know emotionally, which then made me reappraise where I thought she was at in terms of her professional development. And she had some demons that she needed to work through that actually were unconsciously acting as a barrier to her learning that she didn’t realise. (Maria, teacher, UG)*

This is the expertise of the teacher being applied at a highly personal level to the development of the student. The teacher’s knowledge of their field and what is required of a person who wishes to enter it is matched by the teacher’s intimate knowledge of the student, and “exactly where they’re at”. Even the student’s “unconscious barriers” are seen, understood and worked with by the teacher as confessor.

Alex, in a visual representation of his reflective blog, captures something of this dynamic. He first drew the butterflies and the net, and described the butterflies as his

thoughts, and his blog as a net where they could be caught and kept. When I asked about his teacher, he drew the figure of the teacher-scientist who he said was “helping me classify the butterflies”. In other words, the student may be able to catch the butterflies, but only the teacher will know what they are.

*Metaphor of reflection: classifying the butterflies*



Alex saw this as a positive role for someone with expertise and knowledge about the discipline and the subject being studied. However, it emphasises the point I have been making, that whatever lip service is paid to personal interpretations of experience and the empowering qualities of reflection, the confessor-assessor will judge if the reflection counts, and precisely how it should be counted.

## **“It really empowers people”: the authenticity of reflection**

There are many theories of authenticity that could inform reflective practice, and very often these are not explicitly identified – ‘authenticity’ or ‘authentic reflection’ is taken as a concept which does not require unpacking, but which vaguely relates to the value of the ‘true self’ as a force for personal freedom and, consequently,

empowered change in the world. Kreber et al (2007) have found inexactness appearing in discourses of authenticity in teaching, as well.

As we saw in Chapter 2, a Heideggerian perspective on authenticity *seems* to be most commonly what is meant by authenticity in the literature on reflection. It stresses the individual's duty to find and confront the truth of him- or herself, not to "be defined by social norms" (Kreber et al., 2007, p.31), and to "accept responsibility for one's own existence" (p.32). Authenticity affirms an autonomous subject with a unique truth to be revealed and lived by, a truth which needs to be uncovered through effort on the part of the individual. It is not easy to be authentic; it requires moral strength and an acceptance of duty and responsibility<sup>17</sup>. Reflective practices are a means through which to acquire the strength to uncover the authentic self.

Cambridge (2010) offers a useful further perspective on authenticity and the process of e-portfolio building. Calling on the key values of authenticity and integrity, he proposes the concept of a "symphonic style of self-representation"<sup>18</sup>, which:

provides an overall narrative, theory, or map that demonstrates consistency and identifies conflict, showing coherence and surfacing dissonance... Portfolio authors need to figure out how to establish authorship of their competencies, values, commitments, and relationships across all the domains of their lives, creating their own boundaries and principles to govern the whole. (p.50)

To prove their authenticity, then, students must produce a narrative that establishes a consistent and integrated self, one that overcomes even conflict and dissonance.

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Taylor's perspective, which has become important in recent educational theory on authenticity, emphasises a moral responsibility to act authentically within a "horizon of significance" (Taylor, 1991, p.39). For Taylor, "history, the demands of nature, the needs of our fellow human beings, the duties of citizenship, or the call of God are all issues that can define the horizon of significance against which we need to define ourselves to construct authentic identities" (Kreber et al., 2007, p.35).

<sup>18</sup> Cambridge contrasts the "symphonic self" with the "networked self", claiming that e-portfolios support the former through synthesis, narrative and "matrix thinking", while blogs and social networking platforms produce more fragmented, emergent, aggregated self-representations (2010, p.175). I discuss the pleasures and virtues of emergence and aggregation in Chapter 10.

Students in my research were insistent that they are both honest and authentic in their online reflections. For some, this was described as natural or intrinsic; they were so authentic themselves that their reflections could not be otherwise. Megan acknowledged a degree of formality associated with the assessed nature of the writing she did in her online reflection, but insisted on a ‘voice’ that was uniquely her own, that bridged her online and offline life, and that she made no attempt to ‘cover up’:

*I’m not going to make no effort online, but I’m not going to make any effort to cover up, you know... maybe it’s slightly more formal in the blog because I know it’s going to be assessed, but it’s the same, there’s definitely a voice in there that I think if you had a look at my personal blog you you could see a definite, you’d go ‘okay I can tell these are the same person’. (Megan, student, PG)*

For others, authenticity was perceived as a requirement of their course:

*I can’t remember whether they said you know ‘make sure you’re creative and honest and free’ but I felt like that was part of the criteria somehow, whether explicit or implicit. (Alex, student, PG)*

Alex expressed no particular discomfort with the idea of being required to be authentic in his online reflective blog space, but notably the assessment criteria for his online reflection did *not* explicitly include such a requirement. He was not clear himself where the idea of being “honest and free” had come from. It was a “feeling” that he associated with the activity, rather than an instruction given by his teachers or in his course material.

Online reflective practices, like their offline counterparts, continue to be framed in terms of authenticity, integrity, purposefulness and autonomous selfhood (Barrett & Carney, 2005; Stefani et al., 2007). However, to move online is to tap in to new modes of representing the self in what can seem like an especially public or surveilled space (Turkle, 2011, p.273). In addition, the very idea of authenticity is called into question online, as a result of the invisibility of the body (Land, 2004, p.531), and the volatility of digital text and authorship (Bayne, 2006b, p.21), both of



which were discussed in Chapter 2. Authenticity is therefore surfaced in online practices, for students and teachers, more explicitly than in an offline mode.

A concern with authenticity is echoed in the growing body of literature that examines informal blogging practices. Bloggers outside educational contexts often appear to see their practice as not only necessarily authentic, but visibly so, and reflective of a knowable self (Holbrook, 2006). As Reed (2005) comments, “[bloggers] treat weblogs as straightforward indexes of self; they commonly assert that ‘my blog is me’” (p.227). The perception is that audiences expect and assess the authenticity of a blogger’s voice: “aware of the constant possibility that a fictional text may be posing as non-fiction, readers online have been exhaustive in investigating suspicious texts” (Freidrich, 2007, p.62-3). However, as we saw in Chapters 2 and 5, the databased, digital text is never a straightforward index. Its reconfigurability, unreliability and marginality of authorship (Bayne, 2006b), and the discursive power of the database to produce, reproduce and manipulate subjectivity means that online reflection, like assessed reflection, is never authentic.

A related, but separate issue is that of disclosure. I have already discussed how changing norms associated with the web have been misconstrued by teachers who assume that students no longer value privacy (see Chapter 5), but the question of disclosure has a number of component parts, and another of these is the way in which the distancing or anonymising effects of the online environment might tempt students towards self-disclosure. Several lecturers on distance programmes saw a benefit to reflecting at a distance, because students will not have to face or deal socially with the lecturers who see their reflections, and can therefore be more honest:

*Some of them are very very honest and up front in their weblogs in a way which I really doubt that they would be if, if the pedagogy was a, a face to face you know course with a, a written diary or something. (Jane, teacher, PG)*

*Because they never meet us, they can in fact open their hearts and give very personal views about their difficulties, their hopes, their fears, you*

*know, what, what's going on in a way that they do admit, some of them, that they have never opened up to with their partners even. ...it's cathartic (Jess, teacher, PG)*

A shift towards digital disclosure may produce reflections that appear to be quite personal, and this can align well with the desire for authentic reflection that underpins reflective practice in many disciplines. Peter picked up on this point, and remarked that the solitary, asynchronous context of online reflection provoked a degree of honesty and uninhibitedness even on programmes where teachers and students meet face-to-face:

*Some of them were reporting some quite you know personal stuff about feeling afraid... people write these things in the wee small hours of the morning when, you know, they've had a few beers or something... and and it's almost like a confession, like people write in their diaries about. (Peter, teacher, PG)*

A Foucauldian critique of authentic reflection links it to the problematic nature of experience, which is on shaky ground, as we saw in Chapter 2. Confessional practices such as reflection “[bring] forth ‘experience’ as an object of knowledge ... [and assume] that there is a deep truth or meaning hidden within subjects which, if it is found, opens the door to personal autonomy and emancipation” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p.95). These sorts of assumptions underpinned Peter’s enthusiasm for the portfolio:

*It does enable people to construct their own meanings, and em-, it empowers, I'm passionate about it, it really empowers people so rather than, you know when I came into this whole teaching business there was, you know we used to use virtual learning environments... very much the concept of the sage on the stage, they're very much really still driven by what the lecturer says. Whereas you know we're in a generation now where we're creating our own knowledge. And certainly e-portfolios and this concept of having a wardrobe and you can dip in and dip out and and put things together in different ways kind of enables people to create their own reality and their own knowledge base. So I think it's just an incredible powerful medium. (Peter, teacher, PG)*

To construct one's own meaning from a "wardrobe" of options implies a great deal of autonomy, choice and power, and this was what set a personal e-portfolio apart from an institutional virtual learning environment in Peter's mind. A conceptual separation of the self from the outside world is required for such a rhetorical move, but, as Fendler (2003) argues:

it is difficult to sort out exactly what is the subject doing reflection and what is the object being reflected upon. Given that the notion of modern democratic governance is inseparable from self-discipline, it is impossible to draw a line between an authentic experience of reflection and what has already been socialized and disciplined. (p.21)

The discourse of the authentic self could seem to sit uneasily with the development discourse described above. In development terms, the self is to be changed and improved. In terms of authenticity, it is to be uncovered so that it is able to act positively in the world from a position of truth and empowerment. However, the two discourses are easily conflated. As Bleakley (2000) puts it, personal-confessional practices "reveal a core or authentic self that is promised through 'growth' or 'development' techniques" (p.18). In other words, the practice of personal or professional development is a practice of unwrapping the inauthentic layers to reveal a true self. This is related to Boud's (2001) claim that reflection allows for a re-evaluation of experience to determine which thoughts and feelings resulting from it are authentic (p.14). Such practices mask or disguise relations of power, and instead make students "come to believe that what they are is entirely of their own making and that their success or otherwise educationally reflects the 'truth' about themselves" (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p.52). Jane described this conception of reflection as "dangerous":

*I think it's dangerous to see reflection as something that can be easily measured and I think there's a tendency to um mask the power issues that are built in to the whole idea of assessed reflective practice by saying that it's about your, you know it's about the student's voice, it's about who they are, it's about expression of their personal beliefs and selfhood and, you know. But then you get to the end of semester and you have to mark that student, so what are you marking, their essential selfhood? ...you can't have some kind of woolly idea of marking someone's kind of worth as a*

*human being which has been somehow revealed through their reflective practice. (Jane, teacher, PG)*

As we saw in Chapter 4, Jane's response to this was to be extremely explicit about the assessment criteria for reflection, because "there's no point pretending... that you're in in a relationship of a kind of therapist or, um, friend with a student in their reflective writing because you're not". For Jane, the power relations between student and teacher, and the institutional context of reflection, are what shapes reflection – not the authentic selfhood of the student. Other teachers were disinclined to think about power in this way. Sam engaged thoughtfully with me when I suggested that it seemed like she was in a position of responsibility and also power in relation to her students. She felt that she could choose not to "use any sort of position of power", and she saw this as an ethical, not a structural, issue:

*Sam (teacher, UG): Ooh, I hadn't thought about it like that. That's quite interesting. Yeah, no, no you're right, actually, there is there is a big power issue there, isn't there? Um, I think, I take, hang on, how do I do this? I think what I do is I just take the view that they are clients, and I wouldn't do that to a client so why should I do it to a student?*

*Jen: Do what?*

*Sam: Um, use any sort of position of power. ...I think it's a very ethical issue for me.*

*Jen: Right. [pause] But you at the end of the day do [pause] mark them.*

*Sam: Yeah. Yeah.*

Sam did not go further in speculating about the effect that her presence might have on the reflections being produced. When I asked if she thought students would try to write to please her, she described how she "discouraged" that, and that her discouragement was effective.

Another teacher, Rose, dismissed the idea that there could be awkward power issues relating to her role as both mentor and assessor of students' reflective work, because students knew going into the process what the rules of engagement were:

*They're told right from the beginning of the, of the course, you know, what, what the form the assessment is going to take, what's expected of them, um,*

*and you know that I'm going to be marking it so, no, they don't really have a, an issue with that. (Rose, teacher, PG)*

Peter explained to me that the issue of power “just never raised its head at all in any size shape or form” in relation to the portfolio work and high-stakes assessment. He went on almost immediately to describe the workings of such power very explicitly, while at the same time denying that students had any sense of this:

*Peter (teacher, UG): We've had students, you know in the wider picture, where basically students have been convinced that they're doing fine and their [tutor] has turned round and said 'look', you know, 'mate, you're just not...*

*Jen: [laugh] You're not doing fine!*

*Peter: This is not reality, it's not the reality of mine or the rest of the ...team. And you're not, you know unless you change, you're going to fail'. ...I think if you ask any of the students they, they didn't have this sense of power and they didn't have the sense that their portfolios were being looked at minisc- in minuscule by their, their [tutors].*

Jess was able to conceptually separate her powerful assessor's position in which she herself has little personal autonomy, from the one she took as formative tutor or mentor “off record”, as she put it, in the reflective process:

*I don't feel a tension, because I don't think I'm necessarily, um, sort of my role isn't quite the same in these different points. ...When I look at what they share with me [during the course], I'm commenting only, I'm not marking. ...And it is, and in that sense it's ...very much more personal between them and me and, when we get to the marking, we, you know, ... they realise it's a much more formal and public sort of 'this is assessment of my work' and, um, you know, 'these are the things that my tutor's going to mark my work against'. So we all know more or less where we stand. (Jess, teacher, PG)*

In this way, Jess believed that she could encourage and support authentic reflection, and be a force for the empowerment of students, while still fulfilling her assessment duties. As we saw in Chapter 4, though, students' understanding of the role of their teachers is considerably less clear-cut.

These deflections of power by teachers echo what Darbyshire and Fleming (2008) found in their study of teachers in nursing education, who: “continually worried that what they were saying could be viewed as having power over the students in any way” (p.175). The discourse of authenticity in reflection requires the exercise of power to be completely disowned and disguised.

Authentic reflection is a disguise in another sense, too, because of how it is aligned with techniques of development, external standards and assessment (as we saw in the last section). If these techniques are said to reveal the innermost truth of each and every reflective practitioner who engages ‘correctly’ with them, then innermost truth is whatever *can* be uncovered by these practices. Authenticity is then framed in terms of neo-liberal governmentality, which:

presupposes an impossibility—the equitable and totalizing production of rational, self-governing neo-liberal agents who always act in accord with neo-liberal value orientations—and the ruptures that point to the impossibility of the neo-liberal fantasy result in ever more invasive efforts to properly produce, manage, and discipline neo-liberal subjects. (Nadesan, 2006, online)

As we will see in the next section, any amount of invasiveness in the form of surveillance is constructed as beneficial to the good professional. The nature of the self that is recognised and recognisable as ‘authentic’ does not flow outward from a core inner truth, but inward from complex social processes of governmentality. These are disguised by a discourse of confession, which rejects the social and “works to mould subjectivities with the characteristics identified as valuable and necessary... by the needs of governmentality” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p.52).

## **“We don’t want to just see what you are at the end of the course”: visibility and transparency**

In this section I connect the small body of critical literature on surveillance and offline reflection, which was reviewed in Chapter 2, with practices of online reflection. Online reflection is even more affected than its offline counterpart by a

culture of panoptic surveillance, but this has not been analysed in the context of normalisation and governmentality. This section provides such an analysis.

Arguably, all education involves surveillance and the relations of power that circulate within it:

To educate is to subject teachers and learners to powerful hierarchical techniques of surveillance, examination and evaluation ... which constitute them as objects of knowledge and subjects who know. What knowledge is produced as teachers extort truth or provoke action from learners (and vice versa), is conditional upon the relations of power through which subjects are constituted. (Deacon & Parker, 1995, p.115)

As we have seen, in the terms of the confessional it is the confessor (the teacher) who defines what is and is not legitimate knowledge, and so the teacher's gaze (real or imagined) directly legitimises the student's reflection. High-stakes reflection, as a form of appraisal, is "a formal ritual of power and ceremony of visibility, a technology of objectification. It links the formation of knowledge with the display of power" (Ball, 1990, p.159). Furthermore, usually no distinction is made between seeing the reflection and seeing (through) the student, as Gilbert (2001) explains: "[reflective practices] make individual practitioners 'visible' and through this visibility subject to modes of surveillance" (p.201). Writing of reflection in a teacher education context, Erlandson (2005) describes the reflective trainee teacher as "a function of the production of institutionalized (discursive) bodies" who:

reinterprets herself as an object for control in accordance with the light-metaphor of the Enlightenment tradition... [making] her knowing, more professional, more 'reflective', more efficient and therefore more beneficial (in economic terms) and at the same time more docile (in political terms). (p.667)

In this sense, what matters is not what the teacher does or says, but what happens to the student's subjectivity as a result of being rendered supposedly 'transparent' in this way. Transparency is even more problematic than visibility, partly because, as we saw in Chapter 4, students are very aware of the audience(s) for whom they are

performing their reflections. Their reflections may be literally visible, but this does not necessarily bear any relation to ‘transparency’.

In addition, these metaphors of transparency and visibility link directly to the ocularcentrism described in Chapter 3. The association with seeing as knowing (Rose, 2007, p. 3) is particularly pernicious as, even leaving aside deliberate strategies of performance or storytelling, any apparent transparency of self through the visibility of reflection is a disguise. Bleakley (2000) explains this as a matter of closures and gaps, saying that the confessional mode of reflection “promises closure, [but] actually leads to necessary aporias” (p.22) – what he calls “a life written in invisible ink” (*ibid*). The story that is told in reflection is “selective, and porous” (*ibid*), leaving out the construction of the subject as inter-textual and inter-subjective. Scott (1991) returns us to the notion of experience, and argues that conceiving of it “through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems ...the project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself” (p.778).

Despite these problems, visibility is held up as a beneficial quality of both the practitioner and the practice, and it allows other propositions to follow. Clouder and Sellers (2004), for example, acknowledge the intensity of surveillance that professionals (and would-be professionals) are subject to, but argue that “if it is presented as a transparent means of enhancing quality, members of staff who genuinely strive to attain a high quality service clearly embrace it” (p.265). This is what it boils down to: ‘real’ professionals who ‘really’ care about service will embrace any amount of surveillance of their practice, and of themselves. They will be happy to expose and disclose themselves and to forfeit personal or professional privacy. This is perfectly parallel to all kinds of arguments for surveillance – the video recording of public space (through CCTV), tracking and monitoring of communication, invasive airport screening: if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear (Crossman, 2008). Shore and Wright (1999) critique such an



alignment of surveillance (in the guise of audit culture in higher education) with professional self-actualisation and empowerment:

One of the main claims made by advocates of auditing is that it ‘enables’ individuals and institutions to ‘monitor’ and ‘enhance’ their own performance and quality, and to be judged by targets and standards that they set for themselves. This suggests that audit is an open, participatory and enabling process; so uncontentious and self-evidently positive that there is no logical reason for objection. (p.559)

However, as we have seen, “in order to participate ‘successfully’ in the process of ‘confession’ the discursive and material practices which constitute confession as ‘truth’ must have already been accepted” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p.95).

This auditing or monitoring process is part and parcel of some reflective practice contexts. Olive explained how students’ reflective blogs are spaces of monitoring and disclosure of both their own, and others’, performance and even emotional states:

*There’s individual cries for help from a person saying ‘I’m struggling’ and this, you know ‘I haven’t, I haven’t told the rest of my [group] this, I’m a very private’ I mean, I actually see these words in personal logs ‘I’m a very private person’. ...And they’ll, they’ll say that in a written log, and they won’t have said it to their [group], and they know it’s having an impact. Equally, what you’ll see often is other members in the [group] saying ‘We know that so-and-so is going through a difficult time. We’re really worried about them, although they don’t want us to help them’ and so, actually, you get a kind of almost two-way thing of them thinking about others within their working environment and, and wanting it to be taken off their hands, to some extent [laughs], and the tutor to kind of intervene and try and help them and solve the issue. (Olive, teacher, PG)*

I asked Bob if his students expressed uncertainty about what they could disclose, and how visible they should make their strengths and weaknesses in their reflective writing. He described them as having “a lot of concerns” in the early stages, despite encouragement to be “honest with themselves” in their reflections, because:

*once they actually share it with their peers and their tutors, to a certain extent, it becomes public. What we, what we suggest to them is, ‘Well, look,*

*this is part of the development process. If you've identified these weaknesses in, say, placement one, and it's obvious... you've overcome these weaknesses by the end of placement three, then that's what it's all about', right? 'It's not, we don't want to just see what you are at the end of the course, we want to see how you developed as a result of going through the course'. (Bob, teacher, PG)*

Students must take on faith that they will overcome any weaknesses they identify early on. This is high-stakes in more than one sense. The process is framed as one of confession so that others (teachers and peers) can “see how you developed”. Development is a given, and any weakness that can be identified, confessed, made visible can be overcome.

Importantly, visibility does not necessarily correspond with the moment at which a reflection is actually *seen*. As Foucault (1977a) explained, the disciplinary power of the panopticon means that the subject of the gaze (the student, in our context) need only know that it *might* be seen at any time. This is why online reflection can be more intensely panoptic than offline reflection (Poster, 1996). Processes of formative reflection mean students are required or encouraged to ‘share’ their reflective writing, in almost real-time, with their teachers. In doing so it is implied or promised that they will receive feedback. Many students anxiously await the response of their teacher, as we saw Charles describing in Chapter 4, while others, like Lynne, construct teacher presence whether or not the teacher responds. Maria contrasted her practice of viewing portfolios every six weeks or so with the insistent, almost imploring question that her students asked – “have you looked at it, have you looked at it?”:

*Maria (teacher, UG): To be fair I've only logged on and seen their portfolios I would say once every six weeks. I've not looked at them extensively at all, um*

*Jen: That's interesting, so they want you to be there, and they know you can be there, but actually in reality*

*Maria: I've not been... They've said 'have you looked at it, have you looked at it?', and I've always said 'if I look at it I will add a comment so you know I've seen it'.*

Maria reassured students that she would show herself through a comment, but they appeared not to believe her. As a result, through their reflections, they were made subject to the invisible, panoptic gaze at all times.

Indeed, it is not just the teacher whose gaze need concern us. Kimball (2005) warns that apparently empowering practices in digital space:

may simply accelerate the growing institutional appetite for data. ...Ironically, by attempting to gain a more valid vision of student learning, portfolios are potentially more intrusive than large-scale testing. ...The addition of database technologies ...enables an unprecedented penetration of vision—not from a visible observer, but from an invisible, institutional gaze. (p.438)

Writing of VLEs in particular, Mullen (2002, online) argues strongly that the tracking capabilities found in quite a lot of educational software are a manifestation of a “pedagogy of suspicion”:

Under this model – and it is one that cuts across disciplines, institutions, and course types – students will resist the workload demands of your course with every means at their disposal. Now, using this kind of tracking functionality, we can finally catch the little bastards at it.

Wendy described the ways that “technical staff” can track and monitor student participation in the private e-portfolio space (a space where these students are urged to do their own writing and reflecting before sharing certain items with teachers):

*Our technical staff now can, can produce reports for all sorts of things, and they can see who's logged in and who hasn't, who maybe needs a bit of a kick and, um, so that, you know, [teachers], if they want to, can wield the big stick. (Wendy, teacher, UG)*

She also explained that these technical staff can see the full portfolio:

*I mean not that we're going to, but if we needed to go in and impersonate someone, to see if there was a problem, somewhere we can do that, um, but it's only the two [technical staff] that have those rights. Um, no-one else has them, or needs them. (Wendy, teacher, UG)*

The implication is that technical staff should report a lack of ‘participation’ (as construed by the act of logging in) to teachers, who could then approach students to compel them to log in to the portfolio tool. This would be done within limits, however, as “no one else needs” the right to see the full portfolio. Metaphors of how teachers might respond to the tracking information are menacing, though – “kick”, “wield the big stick” – and I wondered if Wendy could imagine there being a push towards cutting out the technical middle-people, and giving teachers direct access to these reporting functions or to the portfolios themselves. She was convinced that this would not happen:

*Oh no, I don't think we'll ever have that, because we've made it very clear that it's the student's portfolio, that's it's their personal one, and that we're only getting to see what they choose to share with us. (Wendy, teacher, UG)*

Typically, in any online system, there will always be someone in an administrative or technical role with access to the entirety of the content in that system. The only question is how far away, in terms of power and anonymity, that person is from the content they can view. The closer they are, the more important it is to disguise or downplay this aspect of surveillance. Wendy argued that the reporting functions were not really ‘seeing’ in any objectionable sense, that the students had meaningful control over their portfolios, and that the tracking they were subject to did not undermine this. This belief is necessary for students and for teachers, because the entire framing of reflection as empowering, student-led, developmental, personal-confessional and authentic depends on it. We cannot really afford to let the disguise slip.

## **Sites of resistance: subversion and disguise**

This chapter has discussed justifications for the use of reflection in educational contexts – development and authenticity – from a Foucauldian perspective, exposing their problematic roots in confessional practices of surveillance and normalisation. As I argued in Chapter 2, online reflective practices are often cut loose conceptually from their offline counterparts, and concerns about reflection are too frequently

treated as resolved in online contexts, when in fact they have become even more complicated.

In continuing to frame reflection as individually empowering and developmental, teachers and researchers are failing to ask the right questions about the larger political and social structures that privilege this mode of writing and subjectivity. Choosing to view online surveillance as unproblematic, and neglecting to consider the effects of power in teacher-student reflective relationships, is to be complicit in the construction of students as transparent subjects who can and should be visible at all times. Such complicity and avoidance disadvantages students because, as Clegg (1999) puts it:

there is a presumption of practitioner change, but the parameters of that change are discursively constructed prior to the novice's engagement. The process is part of a system of surveillance whereby professional competence is judged in terms of compliance with practices or innovations that the practitioner feels powerless to change. (pp.172-3)

According to Marshall (1990), Foucault maintained that his theory of power was not intended to overshadow other approaches, but that instead he was “trying to offer us another aspect, another ‘mask’, that reality wears. ...the problem is to recognise when modern power is being exercised and whether resistance is the appropriate response” (p.26). Although in this thesis I generally frame my recommendations in terms of generative processes, creative alternatives, and positive principles, it seems to me that matters of confession and surveillance are so deeply ingrained in reflective practices, and so problematic, that resistance is the correct response. So, having identified online reflection as a space where power is circulating in problematic and ‘masked’ ways, I want to finish this chapter by proposing two sites of possible resistance: surveillance and authenticity.

In both physical and digital contexts, surveillance is a fruitful area for contestation, resistance and criticality. Crang and Graham (2007), writing about resistance to commercial and military surveillance of urban spaces, describe the kinds of counter-constructions that trouble and subvert dominant discourses. They describe these as

“social performances” that inscribe urban spaces with memory, enchantment and multi-vocality (pp.805-6). Such performances often involve creating more ‘noise’ in the system, or siphoning off and using data for new purposes. Their aim is “to show how pervasive technologies do not have to pacify us ...but can allow us to claim and mark our territory” (p.807). Online reflective technologies are not literally pervasive in the way that Crang and Graham mean, but they do increasingly attempt to see, and be, everywhere, and so the notion of adding noise and (mis)using data is relevant here. As teachers, we might also consider the extent to which we can resist surveillance by declining, explicitly, to use the online surveillance and tracking tools at our disposal.

Schoneboom (2008), in her thesis on anonymous workbloggers, theorises their practice as a form of “creative resistance”, a subversive space where the intensive surveillance, corporate ‘branding’ and depersonalising practices of (for example) call centres is subject to scrutiny and even ridicule by nameless, anonymised workers. Strategies for subverting and working against the grain of surveillance will be local and specific, and must be handled with care in high-stakes contexts where anonymity is not permissible. However, ‘creative resistance’ can take many forms, including critical rethinking of the relative positionings of student, teacher and gaze. De Laat (2008) proposes the exhibitionism of blogging as a kind of resistance, because it:

always amounts to an effort to create one’s own synopticon, i.e., to be the director of one’s own theatre performance, revolving around one’s personal life. Furthermore, if exhibitionism is taken to extremes, it may affect panopticism as well by returning the gaze of surveillance and rendering it potentially meaningless. (p.63)

Authenticity, too, has points of possible slippage which we can appropriate to think reflection differently. Authenticity is problematic because it relies on “experience” as “an irreducible essence” (Bondi, 1993, p.95) which can never be questioned. As we saw in Chapter 2, there is no such thing as ‘raw’ experience, and if there were, we could not express it except through language, which is constitutive of the experience it would attempt to disclose (Belsey, 1994, p.10). Bondi (1993) aligns a post-

structuralist orientation to language with a feminist concern for experience, and she rejects its status as beyond, or beneath, construction and contestation:

To claim that experience is valid is not the same as claiming it to be true; rather, it allows experience to be understood as salient but contestable, rather than as a foundational phenomenon. (p.95)

If experience is understood as being constructed in the process of articulating it, and as a question rather than a statement, then this opens up new ways of thinking about authenticity. We can tell stories about ourselves and our experiences that are valid without having to be true. As teachers we should recognise our own role in disciplining and normalising our students' reflective writing, and explicitly reject the link between visibility of writing and transparency of student 'self', as Ian did:

*We're looking for, for convincingness and we're looking for coherence, um, and there comes a point where, if something's convincing, it sort of doesn't really matter whether it's true or not, it's up to them, in a sense, cause ...you're sort of not exactly marking their progress, you're marking their awareness of their progress. And it, and, and if you, if what they write is relatively convincing and it's coherent and it's adequately evidenced, um, in a way, you don't really need to go any further than that. (Ian, teacher, PG)*

There are gaps in our online reflective practices through which subversive or disruptive practices could slip. Perhaps these would go unnoticed in the macro scheme of things, but then it is at the micro level that governmentality operates on and through the individual. There is no way to stand outside the discourses that comprise reflective practices, but there is space to be more aware of those discourses, and more adept at subjecting *them* to our critical gaze.

Some tactics for resistance may, in their own right, produce new problems. In making their requirements explicit, teachers may generate closure and constraint through their reflective practices. In the next chapter we will see how students use what Hargreaves (2004) calls "legitimate narratives of reflection", and how the structures and templates they are provided with may be protective masks that uncritically depersonalise reflection.

## Chapter 7: Protection, imitation and safety in online reflection

Pedagogy cannot help but encounter the problem of imitation. What is example? ...And is there virtue in being virtuous by imitation? (Derrida, 1997, p.204)

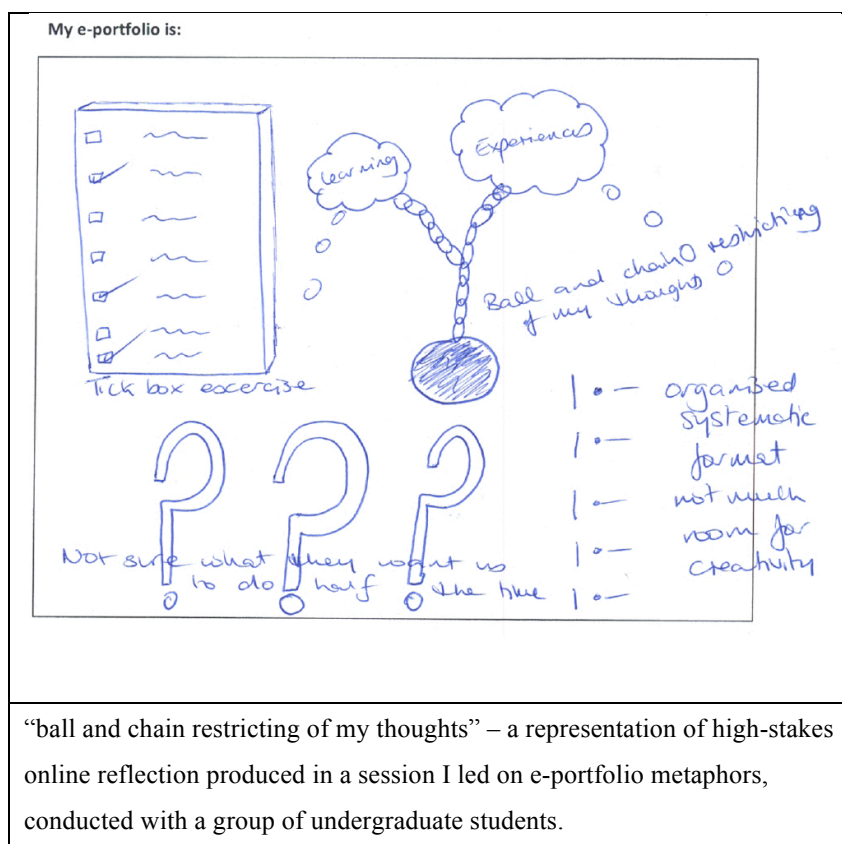
In the previous chapter I raised the issue of normativity: of the way that reflective practices are part of a system of governmentality, surveillance and confession that disciplines and shapes the responses of students and teachers. Practices of governmentality “aim to discipline and normalize all aspects of human experience” (Darbyshire & Fleming, 2008, p.173), and education is no exception. This chapter explores in detail two aspects of normalisation: how students produce what Hargreaves (2004) has called “legitimate narratives of reflection”, and how the templates and interfaces of online reflective tools and environments work to construct a particular vision of reflection, and to standardise student output within the terms of that vision. I see both of these as forms of protective mask which keep students safely within the bounds of what is acceptable, but at the cost of limiting and constraining other possibilities of expression.

A protective mask is one that might be worn for doing dangerous activities – welding, for example, or sport, or fighting. Unlike performance or death masks, protective masks are usually *generic*, designed for strength and safety rather than for aesthetic or expressive purposes (though war masks have sometimes been exceptions to this, for example the expressive Japanese battle masks, or ‘menpô’, which had a dual role – to protect the wearer and to frighten the enemy (*war mask*, 2011)). Without such masks, some activities would simply be too unsafe, and the face too vulnerable. The masks themselves can be restrictive and heavy, though, and the protection they offer is often gained at the cost of clear vision, mobility and comfort. High-stakes online reflection should, I will argue, be seen as dangerous sport, and the tactics employed by students (or created by the technical system) akin to donning a mask that protects, even as it restricts metaphorical vision and mobility.



This chapter also extends the line of reasoning I began in Chapter 4, that reflective writing should be seen as a genre of writing with its own conventions and rules. To teach students these rules is not, as might be feared, to ‘falsify’ reflection or render it inauthentic, for reflection was never authentic to begin with, as I argued in Chapter 6. For many students, experiences of high-stakes online reflection are experiences primarily of constraint, where creativity is discouraged, if it is possible at all. Here is another of the metaphors offered by one member of a group of undergraduates engaging in high-stakes reflection in an e-portfolio tool.

### *Metaphor of reflection: ball and chain*



This student’s “learning” and “experiences” are attached by a chain to a heavy ball. The giant question marks are labelled “not sure what they want us to do half the time”, and there is a drawing of a sheet of tick boxes, some completed and some not, that says “tick box exercise” beneath it. This is echoed in the bottom right corner by what looks like a structured bullet list, with the words “organised systematic format not much room for creativity” beside it. There appears to be a contrast here between

the sense of uncertainty and the sense of constraint, where confusion about how to succeed in the terms of the system sits alongside a feeling of having little room for manoeuvre.

Let us look first at the first part of this contrast, at the matter of ‘rules’ for reflection. I will show how some students can understand and exploit these rules (“imitate”, to use Derrida’s word), while others find them difficult or impossible to negotiate. The second half of the chapter turns to an exploration of the concept of the ‘template’ in online systems – the visual and structural aspects of the online reflective process that are highly constitutive of the reflections that can be produced within them. The chapter closes with some thoughts about the virtue of the blank page, and the ways in which a culture of active writing might benefit reflective practices.

### **“Start from how things weren’t very good, and then see the progression”: legitimate narratives of reflection**

High-stakes reflective practices do not, and cannot, sit outside the governmentality of education. Normalisation is what the project of teaching strives for at every level:

As subjects we are always already overdetermined by the cumulative effects of a pedagogy on and within us. We are to a great extent the products of a body of teaching and its overt and covert curriculum, facets of which we reject or internalize in varying degrees and eventually enmesh by personalizing them and thus making them our own through the performativity of our thoughts and lives. We can never totally divest ourselves of the traces of a teaching body no matter how hard we try. (Trifonas, 2001, p.113)

In reflective practices, normalisation takes the form of a system of performance and confession that produces the ‘reflective self’ the practices are supposed to uncover. This process has both ‘covert’ and ‘overt’ aspects. Returning to Eileen’s comment first discussed in Chapter 4, students often think that a particular kind of story is required in their reflections, and consciously shape their reflective writing accordingly. As Eileen said of her assessors, “they’re looking [for you] to show that

you've, you've developed and that you recognise that you've developed, so that you can say 'This is where I was and this is the way that I've gone or the paths that I've travelled and the hurdles I've jumped over, to get to where I am now'" (Eileen, student, UG). In telling this story, students must also construct the required narrative in such a way that it does not appear that they know it is required. This can be linked also to students' own acceptance or adoption of the development discourse described in Chapter 6. Mona described writing an end-of-course reflection and why she crafted this as she did:

*Mona (student, PG): I tend, yeah, tend to put the good things and the [laughs] positive things, I suppose, yes. ... you're reflecting on the whole year, and it's kind of been a sort of long journey, so you tend, I would say, start from how things weren't very good, and then see the progression. So you want to kind of see or highlight the progression ...if you've seen improvements, you want to see, highlight the improvements, rather than things that have kind of [laughs] not changed much. I think that's the reason. Not that there is anything I can think of that was particularly bad, but*

*Jen: Yeah, it's a question of emphasis, though, isn't it?*

*Mona: Yeah, I think so. You want to see it as a progression, even if slightly. And you, still, even if there hasn't been a progression, you can emphasise the learning, and being more aware of certain problems.*

Macfarlane and Gourlay (2009) describe the process of strategic reflection with a degree of irritation:

What is implicitly rewarded is initial fragility, tentativeness and penitence, followed by uncritical adherence to some deeply flawed and outdated rules of thumb. The forced enactment of this can result in a grotesque simulacrum [sic] of authenticity in response to a powerful normative regime of surveillance, at root unconcerned with individual or context. The details may vary – but the 'journey' has to reach the 'right' destination, via the correct stages ...Only then is the 'transformation' complete. (p.458)

I am less annoyed about a so-called "simulacrum of authenticity" than they are, because I do not believe that there is an alternative version of reflection which produces 'real', as opposed to simulated, authenticity. What bothers me is that students are rewarded, or otherwise, for understanding the rules of what Macfarlane and Gourlay term a "reflection game", and those students who do *not* get it, who are

not able to recognise the “practices of mystery” (Lillis, 2001, p.21) surrounding reflection, are at a disadvantage.

A conversation I had with Natalie illustrates one way this disadvantage might be understood. She described looking at some students’ reflection over time and seeing them having “the same experiences over and over again” because they “never learnt from the last one”. I asked if there was a correlation between successful reflection and overall academic performance. Natalie said that she had the feeling that students who engaged with reflection were “good students anyway”:

*Natalie (teacher, UG): The ones who do well on the e-portfolio, 99% of the time they’re the ‘good’ students, sorry, I’m just putting little speech marks. ...They’re the ‘good’ students. The ones who don’t do so well are not the ‘good’ students, but do they not do so well because they don’t understand how important reflection is and what you can learn from reflecting, um, or are they just not able? You see I don’t think they’re not able I think they just don’t understand and don’t engage with the importance of reflection.*

*Jen: Yeah. And have you found ways of getting those ones to kind of, to get it, like*

*Natalie: No!*

*Jen: Not really [laugh].*

*Natalie: If you’ve got any ideas!*

*Jen: Yeah, sure [laugh].*

*Natalie: ...have I got people to do, improve their reflection? Very rarely, I would imagine, very rarely.*

Natalie admitted that in her experience almost no one got better at reflection, and that those who were good at it were also (already) good at the other things that make up the academic programme of study. This suggests a possibility: if reflection was not a process Natalie’s students learned and improved at, then perhaps she was not teaching the right thing (which is different from teaching ‘badly’, I should stress). Natalie framed the problem as a lack of “engagement” with “the importance of reflection”, but I would argue that what the ‘bad’ students lack is an understanding of the “legitimate narratives of reflection”, as Hargreaves (2004) describes them, and how to construct these.

Hargreaves' "legitimate narratives" (in a nursing education context) are: "valedictory", where the writer improves a difficult situation; "condemnatory", where a negative outcome is analysed and the writer feels "guilty and/or angry"; and "redemptive", where the writer can "express inappropriate attitudes", as long as these are ultimately corrected (p.200). She associates the emergence of these legitimate narratives with the assessment of reflection, and shared ideas within a discipline of what 'good practice' entails. She argues that construing reflection as "morally open", or as what I have been describing as 'authentic', is inappropriate in a professional education context where there are "personal attributes associated with being a competent and acceptable practitioner" (*ibid*).

Some teachers appeared to be aware of these personal attributes, and shared with students something of how to hook into the genre requirements of reflection:

*Jen: Do you think that students ever, I mean, have you noticed that the students ever write anything in their portfolios that you would consider to be kind of too personal?*

*Bob (teacher, PG): Eh, yes, that happens occasionally right, and it also happens with the reflective pieces as well. And what, it, we're doing with IT inductions right at the start of year, and this is nothing to do with e-portfolios, it's just general use of IT in teaching and learning, we we we always stress, in relation to anything they're writing, from day one of their ... course, to think of themselves as [professionals], right. And, from that point of view, any writing they're doing online, whether it's in an email, whether it's in a discussion forum within the virtual learning environment, or whether it's within the electronic portfolio system, right, they, they write in these areas in a professional way. And from that point of view, um, it shouldn't necessarily, well, it will be personal, but it'll be personal from the professional reflective point of view.*

The alternative Hargreaves proposes, and which Bob perhaps was also asking for, is for students to explicitly be told to create an "exemplar illustrating a shared understanding of acceptable professional behaviour, or the dilemmas faced in practice" (p.201). Producing such an exemplar is radically different from the personal-confessional mode of reflection that most reflective practices are modelled on. It requires an entirely different set of skills and a different orientation to the task of reflection. Arguably what is produced in such an account or exemplar is not

‘reflection’ at all in a traditional sense, but narrative fiction. For Hargreaves and others (Bleakley, 2000, for example), this is not a problem, but it does require letting go of the idea of reflection as a mode of revealing an authentic self. Explicitly fictional accounts can offer “a protective disguise for a teacher wishing to discuss problematic professional issues” (Convery, 1993, p.140). However, like the visual and structural templates I will be discussing in the next section, exemplars may also be forms of protection that constrain students, even as they allow them to do well in assessment terms.

This is illustrated by the uncertainty some students expressed about how much experimentation was acceptable in their reflective accounts and strategies. Eileen, who we saw earlier expressing confidence in her understanding of the ‘formula’ of reflection, was less certain about how her final year’s portfolio, which had not been assessed at the time of our interview, would be received, because she had chosen to structure her reflections somewhat differently than in previous years. She was concerned about whether her assessors would take the time to understand what she had done:

*Jen: Does it feel risky to do something different?*

*Eileen (student, UG): Yeah, it does. I’m worried, actually. I’m worried that they’ll sort of, because it’s not the same as year one and year two, not the same format, that they might think ‘you haven’t done it’. ...I don’t know how much time they’re actually going to take reading it. ...So, yeah, I might end up being disappointed.*

*Jen: Mm, do you mind if you’re disappointed?*

*Eileen: [Pause pause] mmm it depends how, it depends on the grade. It depends on the grade.*

Eileen felt able to take a different approach to her final portfolio, ‘reflecting’ in other parts of the portfolio rather than in the explicitly labelled reflective space, but she acknowledged that she would regret the risk if it did not pay off in assessment terms.

It is possible to see how extreme caution and a relatively uncritical acceptance of legitimate narratives of reflection can take hold for students. Tom, a mature student on an undergraduate course, described this as a generational issue, criticising the lack

of critical skills or radical outlook that the “kids” he studied with brought to higher education:

*A lot of the students are just saying ‘alright well this gets me so many points and’, you know, like I say a quantitative type point of view, it it you know the system has given the students that that kind of ‘tick the boxes and move on’ without any qualitative appreciation of what they’re doing, you know. (Tom, student, UG)*

However, Lynne, also a mature student, described the effect of becoming a student as an act of “handing herself over” to the processes of the course:

*I had so much to take in at the beginning of the course and ...because I was really keen to do it, do it properly and I I don’t think I stopped to think about how I was learning or or how I was being assessed ...for these things I I kind of do a bit of research before I start the course and then [pause] I don’t know sort of hand myself over. [laugh] Um, and see how it goes. (Lynne, student, PG)*

To be a student is to be essentially *not responsible*. This can be framed positively, as a matter of trust, or negatively, as a lack of critical capacity, but in either case, despite protestations about student-centred learning, students are usually powerless to dictate the terms of their engagement beyond their choice to participate (which is only really a choice in post-compulsory education, it should be added).

Powerlessness in this sense has the effect of both protecting and constraining students. To this is added, in the online domain, the intensely normative ‘standardised’ structured environments within which reflection is produced.

### **“Whatever templates we gave them on the e-portfolio they used”: safety and constraint in online reflective environments**

Each portfolio has two composers, (1) a student and (2) the system.  
(Yancey, 2004, p.745)

There are two key aspects of standardisation that are of interest in online reflection: the interface and the template. I will mainly be focusing on the template in this

section, but the structure of the tool itself, and the way it is interacted with, its interface, makes from the very start some important decisions on behalf of the user. These decisions are very often not recognised, even by interface designers, who see their work as creating ‘windows’, not ‘mirrors’:

[Designers] usually assume that the interface should serve as a transparent window, presenting the user with an information workspace without interference or distortion. They expect the user to focus on the task, not the interface itself. (Bolter & Gromala, 2006, p.375)

Bolter and Gromala argue that it is only when things go wrong or unexpectedly that users typically look “at” rather than “through” the interface (p.378). It is perhaps not so surprising, then, that this aspect of online reflection is rarely, if ever, addressed in the literature in more than superficial or descriptive ways. Yancey (2004) makes a brief mention of the role of the ‘system’ in the creation of a portfolio (stressing the system’s “greater authority”, p.745), while Kimball (2005), as we will see, focuses on the standardisation of student output through the use of templates, but pays little attention to the effects produced by the interface.

To get a sense of the importance of the interface in online learning, then, we need to look at the small body of literature which does address it. VLEs have been subject in recent years to a few important but small-scale critical visual and interface analyses (Bayne, 2008; Coopman, 2009; Rose, 2006). These have drawn attention to what Selfe and Selfe (1994), in one of the earliest critical studies of computer interfaces in learning contexts, describe as “non-innocent physical borders ...cultural borders ...and linguistic borders” (p.495). As Coopman (2009, online) points out: “research on power distribution in online classes traditionally focuses on instructors and students, yet ...those who design the e-learning system software must be included in the mix”. For Coopman, the so-called ‘design’ decisions that are made affect the choices subsequently available to teachers:

[The VLE] allows users to have it open only in one window per browser. I asked my university’s support staff why this was the case, but they did not know. After checking with Blackboard Inc., the support staff reported it was to prevent students from cheating on quizzes. Yet I *wanted* students to



access various parts of the class Web site when taking a quiz so they might refer to online lectures, discussion, and other materials.

Rose (2006) frames the interface of the VLE as deprivileging the role of both the teacher *and* the student, in favour of “content”. She refers to a specific commercial VLE, WebCT:

The Web-based systems are organized around technology and content. ...the clear expectation of the... designers of WebCT, is that I will ‘migrate’ all of my content... into the WebCT structure, and that, having done so, I will regard this imported content as a course (rather than, say, a course resource or supplement). (p.147)

For Bayne (2008), the visual rhetoric of the VLE, particularly in its ‘default’ values, is value-laden indeed, and the value it embraces most of all is a refusal of the digital, made apparent through its structuring “within the terms of nostalgia”:

It attempts an isolation of the everyday practices of learners and teachers from the shifting forces of digitisation, globalisation and ‘postmodernisation’, masking their effects and limiting the possibility for creative and possibly resistant pedagogical engagement with the new. In seeking to make us ‘comfortable’ with the digital it renders us – lotus-eater like – incapable of grappling with its real challenges. (pp.401-2)

Interfaces are no less value-laden in online reflective environments, but there is a lack of literature that explores this. I offer as a postscript to this chapter a brief visual analysis of one e-portfolio environment which is growing in popularity in higher education in the UK at the time of writing: PebblePad. This analysis is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to give a glimpse of what some students are encountering in their engagement with reflection in higher education, and to indicate some directions for future research and analysis.

Related to, but different from, the question of interfaces and their effects, are the use of templates in online reflective environments. Drawing from Feng’s (2003) review of the literature on standardisation, Friesen and Cressman (2007) describe three theoretical lenses through which standardisation can be viewed in relation to e-

learning: uniformity, objectivity and justice (p.509). Uniformity and objectivity are interrelated: uniformity emerged from industrialisation and the mass production of goods, while objectivity – apparently about flexibility and customisation – relies heavily on uniformity at a systems level. To illustrate this, the authors give the example of email, which may vary in content but which must be structured, or programmed, so that it is readable on any computer anywhere in the world (p.511). Uniformity, they argue, “has the ultimate effect of valuing forms of knowledge that are universal, modular, and interchangeable, at the price of knowledge and practices local and contextually dependent” (*ibid*). Justice, the third lens, is perhaps illustrated best for my purposes by the example of standards of competence, or even assessment criteria: a fixed set of requirements that is applied to every student, and is made visible to everyone in the interest of fairness. In Chapter 6 I discussed several issues related to visibility and standards, so I will focus here on the interplay between uniformity and objectivity as set out by Friesen and Cressman, and how this relates to the use of templates in online reflection.

Institutionally provided e-portfolio and blog systems typically provide a limited number of pre-designed templates for displaying content. The use of design templates to structure reflection, even if there are a wide variety on offer, “has the potential of stereotyping students, forcing them to make their work and their identity fit into a preconceived visual rhetoric of a certain kind of student” (Kimball, 2005, p.453). Kate explained how even seemingly minor constraints within the design of a reflective space could be off-putting. She described the blog as “her personal identity”, and said that: “you’re publishing yourself on the internet here so you want to reflect you in the way it looks as well” (Kate, student, PG). The blog or e-portfolio is its author’s virtual face.

The limitations of most high-stakes reflective spaces – their structural uniformity – are often masked by the student’s ability to make minor modifications (to ‘set preferences’): for example to change a colour scheme, switch between templates or insert a personal photo in the place of a standard image. Eileen was enthusiastic about this: “some of those templates are naff, you know? But if you got something,

say, like a flower template, and you change the font colour and then put a photograph in as well, it just transforms it completely” (Eileen, student, UG). I contend that this is not really a transformation, but rather a very thin veneer of the personal (objectivity) applied to the sameness of the (uniform) structure.

Many courses that assess reflection also provide students with templates for content: forms they can fill in for various kinds of reflection, which might include action plans, evidence against set standards, critical incidents, and so on. In the case of a blog, the content template may simply be a title, a main body and very often a space for tags or keywords that describe the content. Or it may, in the case of an e-portfolio, comprise multiple screens of questions, prompts and required information (see the postscript of this chapter). Templates can come as standard with the e-portfolio, and can also in some systems be created by teachers specifically for their students. Content templates have a more explicit role in shaping the content that is produced through (perhaps I should say ‘with’) them than the design or interface. Teachers described these sorts of templates as ‘scaffolding’, and as a way of making things simple for students:

*We’re just asking them to fill it out, and it’s basically whatever need they’ve got, what their action might be, did they feel they’ve achieved it, what sort of dates. And, again, it’s the same sort of form, everything’s all very similar, um, and they just fill it out ...that’s what we wanted, simple, clean, easy to use, um, nothing difficult. (Wendy, teacher, UG)*

The e-portfolio template can, Wendy suggests, accommodate “needs” and “actions” as particular sorts of reflective statements – framing their reflection (and perhaps the needs themselves) in terms of structured and procedural development of the kind that can be anticipated and met by a form or series of forms.

Maria and I discussed the power that templates have in terms of constructing professional identity. She described this discovery as one of the “unintended outcomes” of the use of electronic portfolios:

*Jen: It really puts the development of the templates... in an interesting light in as much as it potentially has a huge impact on students going forward*

*and you know who they're ultimately going to become.*

*Maria (teacher, UG): Yes yeah absolutely, in much the same way as the power of any any template that you connect to information technology can affect overall outcomes. ...we're using those prompts to help develop and shape a professional identity which I don't think that [we] were conscious of at the start. That's been one of the unintended learning outcomes.*

Maria is suggesting that the power of the template can be harnessed and used, deliberately and well, by the teacher in support of “developing professional identity”. However, the ways in which students will adopt and use these templates is always an unknown quantity. Jess described a “very good student” whose adherence to the templates amounted, in Jess’s view, to “ticking boxes”:

*There was no insight, she didn't really engage with it, um in any personally meaningful way. In fact, I would go so far as to say she'd lost touch with what she actually believed. She was churning out what was, you know, the official line, if you like. And, and I think that's the other side of, you know, the the problem with reflective writing is where you are given a framework or whatever, then you can avoid, uh if you're so inclined, this, you know, sort of personal approach to a large extent. And that's what she did, and she didn't get high marks as a result. (Jess, teacher, PG)*

The implication here seems to be that, as we have seen again and again in other chapters, there are rules within rules of what is expected. Teachers *want* the templates (especially the ones they create) to shape what is produced, but they also want students to show independence and personality; not too much, but enough to reassure the teacher that the process of reflection is really ‘uncovering’ something personal. However, templates provide a pre-generated structure for reflection that students very often treat as fixed, even if teachers encourage “playing” and “tailoring” behaviour:

*Even though we did say to them 'you are encouraged', so we didn't say 'you have to', what we did find is whatever templates we gave them on the e-portfolio they used. Almost as if it was mandatory. And we did say on many occasions 'you can play with it, you can', you know, 'tailor it to your needs'. But they stuck to it almost religiously. (Maria, teacher, UG)*

This description of students following templates “religiously” resonates strongly with the metaphor of confession in the previous chapter. It also suggests a level of faith that recalls Lynne’s comment above, that she “hands herself over” to the processes of her course. Thought about in terms of protection, this makes sense: the safest thing to do is to follow the rules, and templates are seen as manifestations of rules. Other manifestations, such as exemplars, have a similar pull. Ian described some students “expressing appreciation” for the exemplar he provided, but also that they had a tendency to:

*[adhere] quite closely to to what it models, even though we did, I did say, you know, this isn’t supposed to be something for you to do exactly as it is, it’s just the way I’ve done it. But quite a lot of them took it as a as a relatively, as a template, really. (Ian, teacher, PG)*

Ironically, students are not unreflective about why their reflections can seem impersonal, or why they rely heavily on templates. For some students, like Stewart, the process of reflection is simply too obscure – “airy fairy”, as he put it – and he opted to disengage and distance himself from the concept of reflection, focusing instead on the most heavily templated activities (such as SWOT analysis, a method by which ‘strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats’ are identified) that did not require such delicate negotiations:

*Stewart (student, UG): I personally view [reflection] as a bit of, you know an airy fairy, well what does it actually mean? And [pause] yeah I’m not a great fan of reflection [laugh]. But I suppose it does have its benefits. Um but I suppose personally I don’t think I can write down a reflection. Cause it’s quite personal, but I could write down a swot analysis, I could write down action plans... I suppose it is a bridge between you and what you’ve experienced, you reflect on it which is still personal inside, and then you would formulate it into a written, sort of like a formulated grid or whatever you want to call it...*

*Jen: Yeah, so it is like deper-, like do you go through a process of like depersonalising it somehow to put it in your swot or put it in your*

*Stewart: Yeah, I suppose yeah depersonalising it to make it more professional.*

For Stewart, templates offered a reprieve from the insubstantial, fuzzy processes of reflection, and a bridge that separates written accounts of experience from the ‘self’

of the student. In focusing on the pre-given structure, Stewart was both ensuring that he ‘ticks the boxes’, and protecting himself from the uncertainty and danger of going ‘off script’ into uncharted, unformulated territory.

Natalie made a further suggestion: that scaffolding in the form of templates might be particularly important for students who lack confidence or who “struggle”, and for whom a “blank page” would be off-putting:

*I think the scaffolding is, um, is really important, until students develop the confidence to go it alone, um, because at least with that scaffolding there, it means that, they're not faced with that blank page syndrome you know when you've got to write something for somebody? A report or, and you start off, you've opened your document, you've given it a heading, 'I'll put page numbers on it, I'll do a title page. Oh, it's about time I had a coffee'. (Natalie, teacher, UG)*

This is an extremely common argument for the use of templates in reflective activities. The so-called “tyranny of the blank page”, the “anxiety all writers are apt to experience when faced with the task of overpowering the silence” (Heller, 1989, p.210), is thought to be unhelpful and destructive, something that students need to be protected from. Perhaps this is because reflective writing is conceived of as a transparent window, much as Bolter and Gromala (2006) describe the interface. If writing is seen in this way, it becomes merely a hurdle to be jumped over, not an essential part of the meaning-making process of reflection.

For my benefit, Peter likened the interplay between choice and constraint in an e-portfolio to the process of writing a PhD : “you will write it to a structure with headings [rather than] 50,000 words of just free form thoughts” (Peter, teacher, UG). What this overlooks, though, is that academic writing is usually in large part a process of *developing* that structure. There are norms of academic prose, and these do profoundly shape what is produced, but the reward of writing a PhD, of dealing with the blank page, is the possibility of producing something original that ‘breaks a mould’ rather than ‘fitting into a template’.

I have come to conclude that the blank page is a necessary part of the process of being or becoming a writer (of reflections or anything else). This need not be a complete free-for-all – indeed, the constraint offered or imposed by the legitimate narratives described above, and the presence of a demanding audience in the form of teachers and assessors, would preclude that. Kimball (2005) argues that ‘real’ reflection and learning comes not through overstandardising in the form of templates (uniformity), but through students’ *interpretation* of educational standards (justice):

Standardization... should pertain to the educational standards, rather than to the unique individuals who will be arguing that they have fulfilled the standards. Within locally determined limits, we should give students flexibility in how they choose to show rhetorically that they have fulfilled those standards. (p.453)

Some students would actively prefer the blank page. Beth very articulately described feeling restricted by the template options available:

*I think sometimes the format, um, doesn't allow it to to, you've got different [forms] that you can use. You can do a thought, which is like a reflective journal, you can do an achievement, an ability, um, an experience. Um but there was something I was trying to do the other day, um, and I didn't want it set out the way that it was, the templates, they're very, they're very specific. It would be like description, then reflect, and then, um [pause] something else, and I didn't want that format. I can't explain what I wanted, it was just, what I was trying to to say didn't fit into any of the templates that they had, so even that can be quite restrictive. (Beth, student, UG)*

She had previously mentioned the constraints of the electronic interface and that she would prefer a ‘blank piece of paper’, so I asked her if she would have known what to do with the blank page in this instance. She replied:

*Yeah, yeah, I would have set it out my way and highlighted the things I felt were more important and, you know, in my way... I was just trying to, um I just didn't feel, so I ended up using a particular [form] that I didn't feel really matched, um, what I was trying to say. But, again, I was stuck with, with the one they, what, what they provide. ... if you just want to... do a different kind of text, different kind of entry, um, but it's, it's, quite structured, but the whole thing is structured, isn't it? (Beth, student, UG)*

Beth talks about being “stuck”, and about using a form that didn’t “match” what she wanted to say. Particularly telling is her comment that she couldn’t explain what she wanted, she just knew it was not a fit with the templates available. This supports the need for the blank page: sometimes the only way to understand something is to do it – to write, structure or create it from scratch. The notion of authorship here becomes relevant, and Yancey’s (2004) point about the portfolio system’s greater authority becomes more problematic.

Kimball (2005) conceives of authorship as relating to control over structure as well as content. He advocates for the use of ‘static’, student-authored HTML pages as portfolios, not database-driven systems, in part because:

in portfolio pedagogy, students are not merely the users of the system; they are, or should be, the authors of it. The user of a database portfolio system is more accurately the teacher or administrator who employs the system to manage and assess student work. Students in these systems risk becoming even less than authors or users, dropping to the level of content providers. (p.442)

A ‘web-sensible’ portfolio, as Yancey (2004) calls it, “is suggestive rather than deterministic” (p.753), but students are seldom encouraged to produce content within web-sensible environments, to acquire relevant skills or even to use the ones they may already have. The web authoring skills that students acquire through the process of creating online artefacts can be at a very superficial level, or a more profound one. Templates emphasise the former:

On one hand the templates made the electronic portfolio easy to use; on the other hand, the templates possibly discouraged candidates from developing the technology skills that were embedded in the templates. ...The electronic portfolio rendered content using a pre-selected template. Therefore, the Web editing tasks were almost invisible to the candidates who only filled in blanks. (Ma & Rada, 2006, p.115)

By making impenetrable the processes of web authoring in the name of simplicity and ‘user-friendliness’, templates subvert students’ sense of agency in relation to technology (Gillespie, 2006, p.663). Protection here is best understood as a well-



meaning but ultimately misguided attempt on the part of teachers to shield or protect students from difficulty or uncertainty. User-friendliness, guidance and clear expectations are of course important, but students need more, not less, flexibility and leeway if they are to go beyond imitation in their writing and digital practices. Uniformity is boring for both students and teachers, and students who resort to ‘ticking the boxes’ do so from a place of constraint, anxiety, or calculation.

## **From imitation to negotiation: making protection work**

I tell you, if one wants to be active, one must not be afraid of going wrong, one must not be afraid of making mistakes now and then. Many people think that they will become good just by doing no harm — but that’s a lie... Many painters are afraid in front of the blank canvas, but the blank canvas is afraid of the real, passionate painter who dares. (van Gogh, 1884, online)

In the quote that opened the chapter, Derrida raised the problem of imitation. He asked what we mean by ‘example’. This chapter has described two ways in which ‘example’ might be understood – through the deployment of ‘legitimate narratives of reflection’, and through the templates and interfaces which structure online reflective practices. I have asked, in effect, what the virtues of imitation might be, and what the trade-off is in terms of homogeneity, constraint and the depersonalisation of student reflection.

Creative possibilities – the expressive performances I proposed in Chapter 4 – are largely closed off by the exigencies of box-ticking and legitimate narratives, the sterility of fixed and standardised reflection, and the superficiality of web ‘authoring’ within highly structured digital environments. The apparent personalisation of these spaces and structures is a disguise, and the overall effect is likely to be a uniform production of online reflective accounts. This is one area in which research that analyses reflective accounts, in their digital contexts, would be extremely valuable, and this is an area for future study that I would like to pursue.

Imitative features of online reflection also have their benefits: structure gives students the safety that limitations bring. When students must protect themselves from an uncritical discourse of disclosure and authenticity, as discussed in the previous chapter, imitation of this kind can be necessary and even desirable. So the conclusions I am drawing here should be taken as part and parcel of my call for a new orientation towards reflection and reflective writing. Without a critical engagement with the dominant discourses of reflection, encouraging a more flexible mode of expression in online reflective writing will result in an intensification of the governmentality that I have been describing and critiquing.

In addition, high-stakes reflection might not be able to be a space of risk taking, for all the reasons discussed so far in this chapter and in previous ones. A turn towards fiction as Hargreaves (2004) describes it may not lead to more flexible and creative engagement – it may, instead, be just a more overt practice of imitation.

However, it is worth asking the question: could the online reflective space be a space of activity, in van Gogh's words, rather than imitation? If we stop attempting to shield students from the experience of the blank page, what sorts of strategies might emerge, and would they be of value? It seems that at least some students are finding a way to negotiate expressive spaces for themselves. In our interview, I asked Megan how she decided on and evolved her approach to writing her reflective blog. She set out the ways in which she was influenced, but also took control, in that space:

*Reading it over myself and my partner reading it over my shoulder [laugh] and also getting some feedback from [my tutor] earlier on and sort of, I think the first couple of times I had feedback I sort of asked questions back and, with that in mind, and with um sort of talking to other people on the course in Facebook and um and what was coming out of discussions and things with the online tutorials, I got a sort of better feel of what was okay and, I did have a look at some of the other blogs that were public ...I had a little look... to see what I could see and that was kind of interesting cause there was such a wide variety of different styles there I sort of thought 'right, okay, I can do whatever my style is going to be'. (Megan, student, PG)*

Megan did not reject the influences of others, she was interested in the standards being set and the expectations being placed on the work, but she felt able, within those boundaries, to develop a personal style. Such confidence has to emerge from a course or programme culture of active writing, because a personal style cannot easily develop in a heavily structured digital environment, or in a context where teachers are worried about protecting students from the riskiness of the blank page, or where students are required to conform to very rigid modes of performance.

Chapter 9 will explore further what it might mean to develop risk-taking digital cultures of active writing. First, though, another aspect of normativity needs to be discussed: the practices of professionalism and disciplinarity that inform the subjectivity of students as they become professionals. These are more active forms of normalisation, as we will see in the next chapter, and they involve the developing habits and ways of thinking and practicing that reflection in professional contexts fosters.

## **Postscript: a brief visual analysis of an e-portfolio platform**

It is worth briefly examining a specific example of the kind of environment in which online reflection is being produced, to better understand what sorts of values these interfaces and templates might be constructing. At time of writing, PebblePad is the e-portfolio package that the University of Edinburgh provides and supports, and is also in use by two of the programmes in my study. The screenshots below come from my own portfolio space, set with the default ‘pebble’ template.

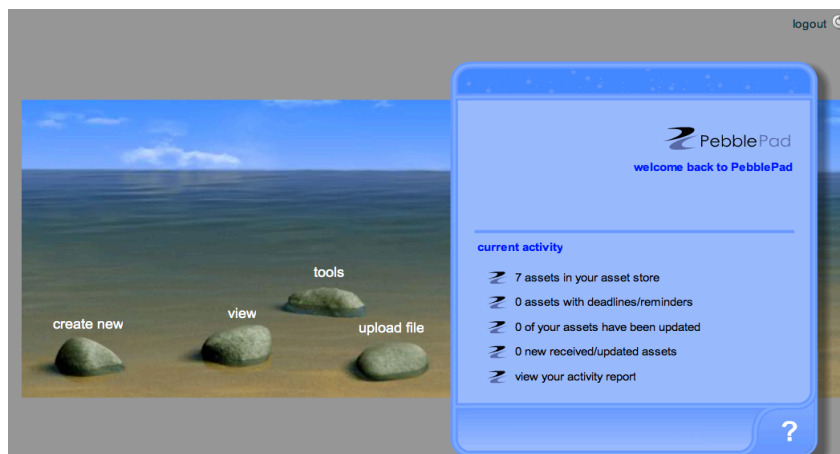
PebblePad brands itself “much more than an e-portfolio”, but its functionality – storing, organising, and presenting personal content – is typical of most e-portfolio systems. Its official website describes it as having been “designed with the learner at the centre”, and it promises to improve both formal and informal learning through

“scaffolding”, “sharing”, and “publishing”<sup>19</sup>. Individual items uploaded or created in the system are called “assets”, emphasising a corporate orientation to user content and supporting a ‘personal branding’ approach to reflection and portfolio-building. This use of language may appear unproblematic (if obnoxious), but it encodes or interpellates the sort of user who can be at home within these spaces:

Students who want to use computers are continually confronted with ...grand narratives which foreground a value on middle-class, corporate culture; capitalism and the commodification of information; Standard English; and rationalistic ways of representing knowledge. (Selfe & Selfe, 1994, p.494)

In contrast to this orientation, PebblePad’s interface aims for a friendly, approachable, informal style, with various default templates that make the home page look like a beach (complete with water sound effects), a garden, an urban silhouette or a living room (complete with white, male, cartoon avatar). These are mostly notable for their use of iconography of the material world, and for their positioning of users as in need of such friendliness and non-digital reference points – perhaps inadvertently taking a condescending approach to those who might choose, or be required, to approach their reflection, personal or professional development via this system.

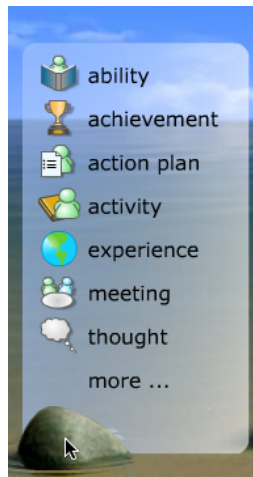
### *PebblePad: e-portfolio home page*



<sup>19</sup> <http://www.pebblepad.co.uk/>, retrieved 1/6/2011.

Amongst the templates on offer there is also the option to create “your desktop”, which invites the user to upload a photograph of themselves and choose a background that customises their home page. As discussed earlier in this chapter, these superficial forms of customisation mask a more fundamental uniformity of structure. PebblePad provides a number of pre-defined templates and forms for students to fill in. Reflection is ‘scaffolded’ through a number of specific templates for adding and displaying reflective content. Each “reflection” is a discrete object, and to create one users must first decide what sort of reflection it is: for example, is it a “thought” or an “experience”?

*PebblePad: set of options for creating a reflection*



This decision made, a further set of choices appear. For “thoughts”, a title must be provided, tags selected that indicate what the thought will contain, and the thought must be further labelled as a “journal”, “reflective journal”, or to fit one of two simple models of reflection – a three-stage “what, so what, now what” model, or four-stage “reflective cycle”.

*PebblePad: page one of three for recording a “thought”*

Choosing “reflective cycle”, for example, then offers the user three additional screens of forms to fill in, including the four stages of reflection identified by the template: experience, reaction, analysis, planning. Each stage has a “help” tip to explain what content belongs there:

*PebblePad: roll-over guidance for writing about an experience*

*“describe your thoughts and feelings about the experience”*

Along with the observations about constraint and templates made above, in Chapter 9 I will discuss what other problems such intensive scaffolding might produce. Suffice to say here that I think this small set of screenshots demonstrates how far e-portfolio systems can be from the challenge and risk of the blank page. More visual and structural analysis of this kind would open up new ways of thinking about and critiquing these environments, and might give teachers the confidence to try alternatives that do more to embrace the riskier aspects of the web and its possibilities for more challenging expressions of subjectivity.

## **Chapter 8: Allegiance, repetition and discipline in professional reflective practices**

Earlier chapters have not focused extensively on the professional educational environments in which the programmes in my study are located. This chapter aims to situate earlier matters of concern – which I would argue would largely apply to any high-stakes reflective context – within professional educational discourses, and examine what might be particular about these disciplinary settings.

Ideally, the whole of this thesis would have specified disciplinary contexts alongside pseudonyms, and would have preserved rather than removed discipline-specific terminology from interview quotes. In this chapter especially, the value of analysing particular discourses of professionalism would have been substantial. However, because the community of people actively involved in promoting and researching high-stakes online reflective practices in the UK is relatively small, and because several of my teacher interviewees are part of this community and might be identifiable if associated with their disciplinary context, I have decided to give up specificity for the sake of taking extra steps to preserve the anonymity of my research participants. As with the analysis of reflective artefacts, this would be a fruitful area for further research. This chapter concludes with a brief postscript which begins to indicate how such an analysis might be undertaken, using interview data from a social work context and from an education context, but not identifying the speakers with their pseudonyms or any additional information.

Chapter 6 introduced the ideas of confession and transparency as problematically fundamental to reflective practices, and explained how these can be normative mechanisms. In Chapter 7, normalisation was approached in terms of how protection (in the form of templates and legitimate narratives of reflection) keeps students safe while at the same time constraining them. However, there is a certain passivity in the idea of protection that does not fully capture what normalisation does. The argument in this chapter is that processes of reflection actively do and produce new things –



though not necessarily the things that are intended, due to the complexity of disciplinary discourses. The concept of ‘discipline’ here is shorthand for talking about subject and professional allegiances, and is also a frame for the processes of practice and repetition that typify professional reflection. Both these definitions of discipline are underpinned by a Foucauldian approach, in which discipline has a particular goal: that of maintaining order through analysis and categorisation. Foucault (1977a) argues, writing of the disciplinary responses to the plague that characterised the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century:

The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion ... It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. Against the plague, which is a mixture, discipline brings into play its power, which is one of analysis. (p.197)

He contrasts this with the earlier response to the leper, which was exile rather than control:

The exile of the leper and the arrest of the plague do not bring with them the same political dream. The first is that of a pure community, the second that of a disciplined society. Two ways of exercising power over men, of controlling their relations, of separating out their dangerous mixtures. (p.198)

My point in this chapter is that becoming a professional is best understood as a process of discipline, rather than purity. No one is suddenly and perfectly a nurse, or a lawyer, or a teacher: it is through a process of disciplining and categorising students into particular ways of thinking and practicing (McCune & Hounsell, 2005), or “controlling their relations”, that the periphery gradually becomes the centre. The mechanisms of surveillance and confession I described in Chapter 6 show how power is subdivided so that members discipline and watch each other and themselves.

*Disciplining mask: the scold's bridle*



20

Returning to the metaphor of the mask, I offer the example of a scold's bridle as a way of thinking about discipline. The scold's bridle, or branks, was used in parts of Scotland and England between mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries. Its purpose was to punish women for talking too much, nagging or inappropriate speech. It worked by restraining and sometimes injuring the tongue. It was an unofficial (not legally sanctioned) alternative to the 'cucking stool' – a method of punishing women formally found guilty of being scolds by dunking them in water (Boose, 1991).

The scold's bridle's double function was to physically prevent the undesirable behaviour (talking), and to humiliate the wearer in public and thus underscore community standards of acceptable behaviour for both the woman being punished, and her observers. The community's observation of the punishment was part of the punishment. Boose argues that punishments for men did not have the same 'carnavalesque' or degrading quality as those for women, because women's marginal social status allowed:

a blunted form of community sacrifice, a scapegoating mechanism through which the public body expels recognition of its own violence by projecting it onto and inflicting it upon the private body of a marginal member of the community. (p.190)

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<sup>20</sup> © 2005 David Monniaux; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Branks\\_dsc05369.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Branks_dsc05369.jpg), retrieved 6/8/2011.

I propose that, in professional education, students are the marginal figures whose behaviours can be disciplined by being displayed through reflection. This is not to draw inappropriate parallels between public humiliation and reflection, or indeed to make much of the ‘punishment’ aspects of discipline. Reflection is mostly produced or consumed in a private, albeit confessional and normative, mode between students and teachers, against a background of generosity and with students’ best interests at heart. However, the broader context in which reflection is deployed is one in which acceptable behaviour is determined by a combination of professional and academic standards. The job of the student is to absorb and replicate or imitate these standards through confessional practices that produce what they are intended to demonstrate. The greatest force of discipline comes when it is internalised, when the professional discourse is reproduced by the individual as if it were (indeed, because it is) their own.

Replication is not superficial, however: over time, repetition becomes memory, instinct and ‘common sense’, because “what we ask students to do is who we ask them to be” (Yancey, 2004, p.739). The work of the teacher as confessor aligns the production of professional selves with the desirable discourses of that profession. Students on professional and vocational programmes practice writing like, talking like, the professionals they aspire to become, and in doing so, they become them.

The logic of discipline is the logic of immobility: “that which moves brings death, and one kills that which moves” (Foucault, 1977a, p.205). The templates described in the previous chapter share this logic of immobility. However, reflection is not exclusively a process of disclosure or constraint, but of performance and shifting subjectivity. For this reason, replication of discourses is never exact. Indeed, the categories ‘academic’ and ‘professional’ as used in this chapter should not be seen as homogeneous, but rather as indicative of something of a clash of cultures that takes place in the practices of higher education, and which disturbs the political dream of discipline (and disciplinarity). This dream always masks disorder (p.198) and complexity. The process of disciplining allows community to persist in recognisable forms, but it is full of gaps, accidents and novelty, too.

The focus in this chapter on professional practices reflects the orientations of the programmes in my research, and is not intended to suggest that similar processes do not take place in “pure” academic subjects, those without an explicit professional dimension. Academic practices are always about disciplinarity and disciplining, and there are ways of thinking and practicing that attach to every subject area (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

In the next section I describe the importance of professional identities for both students and teachers. I then go on to demonstrate how disciplined reflection, in the sense of habit and repetition, is deployed to produce the professional subjects required from higher education in the programmes in my study. Finally, I explore how competing paradigms of professional and academic discourse are exacerbated, rather than resolved, by reflection. This chapter closes by proposing that the concept of “supercomplexity” (Barnett, 2000) is a useful way of considering how competing disciplinary paradigms play out in reflective practice. Teaching students to manage conflicting ways of knowing, such as ‘professional’ and ‘academic’, is an example of the sort of pedagogy which supports uncertainty and openendedness, and is therefore an important aspect of professional education in a supercomplex world.

### **“If you want to make a difference you’ve got to be at the universities and the colleges”: being in and of a profession**

In professional and vocational programmes in higher education, teachers typically have a dual role; they are both academics and professionals themselves, with ongoing ties to the industries and professions that they have come from. They are often members of the same professional bodies that their students will join, and are therefore subject to the practices of development and surveillance through reflection that those bodies require. Natalie commented wryly on her own and her academic colleagues’ reflective practices as compared with what students are encouraged to do:

*Natalie (teacher, UG): The professional body [pause] requires, um, its, um, registrants, eh, to keep some type of portfolio ...I can tell you, cause we're all [in the professional body], eh, just as a, and we're a small sample, I imagine there'd be less than half of us who would be able to say, hands on heart, 'I can show you my portfolio tomorrow'. Some of us might be up all night, trying to make it for tomorrow, um, you know, but that's human nature, isn't it?*

*Jen: Yeah. And would you be in that half?*

*Natalie: I'd be in the half that haven't got it*

*Jen: Yeah! [Laughs].*

*Natalie: I'd be in the half that might anticipate, when I left here, I could stay up all night and do it but, by 1 o'clock in the morning, I've realised how foolhardy [laughter] that was, and I'd just have to come back and admit I didn't have it.*

Several teachers I spoke to described a sense of responsibility for maintaining quality within their professions, and an example of this is given in the postscript of this chapter. However, sometimes, rather than wishing to maintain the status quo, teachers are driven to try to change aspects of their professions that they have found problematic. Sam felt passionately that part of her role was to send people out into practice who could hold their own against what she called the “dinosaurs” in her traditional industry:

*If you want to make a difference if you want to change things you've got to be at the universities and the colleges, cause that's where the thinking is is taught. You know the dinosaurs are cleared by you know people who are working in the colleges and the universities challenging and changing thinking and facilitating students, that's where it changes. (Sam, teacher, UG)*

Conversely, though, the requirements of professions have a direct and non-negotiable impact on what goes on within professional education, so teachers' ability to foster change may be more limited than they would wish. Professional programmes are usually validated by the relevant professional body, and so the priorities of that body have substantial influence, which Sam also recognised:

*Jen: Are your courses validated in conjunction with your professional bodies?*

*Sam (teacher, UG): Oh yes yes yes [laugh] yeah, big time*

*Jen: ...and are those requirements that they have for you reflected in what*

*they do with their own members after graduation?*

*Sam: Um, what I do Jen is I actually work from that end back. ...I just basically started from the, what happens in industry back ...the first [year] portfolio really is about who they are as a person ...in the middle bit of the degree they're moving from the personal into the professional and vocational and then in the last bit of the degree they're moving out of that stage which is vocational into continuing professional development... preparing to leave and join the industry or preparing for a promotion within the industry and complying with the co-, the continuing professional development requirements.*

Sam held both the hope of preparing her students to “clear the dinosaurs”, and the recognition of the constraints that were and would continue to be placed on them by the professional body’s requirements and the need for both skills *and attitudes* that would make them employable.

Professional bodies themselves may sometimes be part of a project of transformation within professions and industries. Wendy described the changes in her profession which have led to her traditionally science-based curriculum shifting to put more emphasis on “touchy-feely” skills such as reflection and communication:

*[Professionals] now are reflective practitioners, this is what the [professional body] want, um, and they've been trying, they have a portfolio for CPD ...the idea was that, once they beca- went into [practice] all of a sudden they would become reflective practitioners, and they realised that that didn't happen it wasn't something that [they], because they're quite sciencey, came to easily. Um, reflection was one of these touchy-feely things that scientists didn't do, so [people in this profession] couldn't quite cope with it. ...and really, it's because the [body] is saying... you have to think about reflection. (Wendy, teacher, UG)*

She went on to describe the transformation of the profession from one of data and analysis to one of engaging with clients and a more therapeutic ethos, and the consequent changes in the way that she teaches:

*They have to develop, and part of that development is reflection, not just saying 'well, if this happens, this should happen'. They've got to see everything else, reflect on it, and then make a decision. So, for us, we've got to, you know, start at first year, and build that up... [The profession is]*

*changing, as a career, and the course has to change to to reflect it, and part of that is making them reflect. (Wendy, teacher, UG)*

In some of the more highly-regulated professions, work that students do in portfolios and other reflective spaces ultimately forms part of what gets them in the door to be registered members of the relevant body, and is even sometimes a condition of getting a job after graduation. This is the other sense in which reflection can be high-stakes for students in these kinds of programmes. It is not only about assessment and the class of degree they obtain, but also, and very directly, about their subsequent working life. This can mean that portfolios and reflective writing have to do double duty, and be reframed after assessment so that they are suitable for their next purpose:

*Within the e-portfolio itself, one of the submenus is development targets. Like any other education [in this profession], eh, they have to complete a ...profile, which goes to their [employers]. So what happens is, within their development targets within the e-portfolio, that's the, that's a, that's what they address. So, for that point of view, it's just a simple copy and paste job, but from their e-portfolio into their ...profile. Which is good, because it means that we're seeing it, right, before it goes into their ...profile, so if there's anything contentious, eh, we [laughs] ...can advise them that it'd be a good idea to take that contentiousness out. (Bob, teacher, PG)*

Bob had both academic and professional gatekeeping roles. These roles overlapped in places, and in others, such as points of assessment and accreditation, they diverged. Reflective statements which might be acceptable in assessed work, which might be welcomed as evidence of criticality, or 'authentic' reflection, are reframed as "contentious" in the context of accreditation.

The tight coupling between the professional and academic spheres sometimes also breaks down at the point of the digital environment, and this can be a cause of frustration for teachers. Wendy described having to give up on waiting for her professional body to specify and develop an e-portfolio that students could use (a portfolio system was already in use in the profession, but was proving difficult to adapt to academic requirements), and instead having to develop a bespoke system. She was concerned about students eventually having to move all their material, and

learn a new system, but was sceptical about when, or if, the professional system would meet her needs: “we just couldn’t, we couldn’t wait for them to catch up with what we wanted, so we’ve just gone and built our own” (Wendy, teacher, UG).

Bob explained how his students’ portfolios might soon move into a national professional system, away from the institutionally provided system they currently used. I asked whether he thought that reflecting in a more professionally orientated space would impact on how students perceived the audiences for their reflections, and he described this as a “major issue”.

There may be some benefits to keeping academic and professional portfolio spaces separate, so that the sorts of “contentious” statements that students might make during their time in university are less likely to haunt their professional lives. The apparent inability of professions and universities to work together at a technical level is in this sense a blessing in disguise. This is hinted at by the practices of postgraduate students who are also working professionals on very professionally-focused programmes, as Ian’s students were:

*Ian (teacher, PG): If somebody wrote, you know, a kind of confessional, a big confessional reflective piece, you know, which was full of insight and angst, but didn’t actually meet the criteria [laughs] I don’t quite know what, what we’d do. That hasn’t actually happened yet, I don’t think.*

*Jen: No, it hasn’t, right okay.*

*Ian: So yeah, I mean, there’s a whole, there’s a whole other set of, of, um, sort of you know quality considerations about reflection, aren’t there? A different kind of reflection, if you like, more spontaneous and more kind of psychosocial kind of reflection, um, we don’t get too much of that. ...*

*Jen: Yeah. Yeah, I wonder, I mean, I wonder if this is some, to some extent, a disciplinary thing? Um, not exactly disciplinary but, because the course is so focused on kind of professional, professionalism and professional development, that maybe, you know, maybe students [pause] engage with that hat on, you know, as not so much as students but as professionals...*

*Ian: I think, I think that that is definitely a factor. I think we do, right from, from the start, we made quite a lot of issue about, about, you know, being co-professionals and, and the whole thing about being professionalism and the extent to which, you know, you kind of develop as a professional, and so on and so forth. ...it may be that some of them do actually sort of pick this whole thing up as part of the general discourse of professionalism, yeah.*



While not adopting a professional body's technology, the emphasis on professional development in Ian's course would seem to preclude not only confessional modes, but experimentation with writing that diverges from the accepted discourse of professionalism.

Professional expectations and requirements may sometimes mean that reflection itself is not possible or desirable in a practice context. I asked Olive about a comment she had made in an earlier discussion we had, that her students value reflective writing, but could not carry on with it in practice because of the competitive nature of their profession. She expanded on this:

*There's two issues for the trainee, if you like, once they move into ...practice. One is they don't want to be seen as being people who make mistakes [laughs] ...there is a genuine fear ...it's such a competitive environment, that they're worried they will not be kept on ...unless they are flying up there and showing what a great, wonderful safe pair of hands and wonderful [professional] they are. (Olive, teacher, PG)*

The other issue she identified was employers' concern that disclosures of mistakes or uncertainty in reflective writing could fall into the wrong hands and be used to disadvantage the organisation as a whole.

How students understand the demands their professional contexts will make on them affects how they approach reflection even in a "safe" educational context. Students, as well as their teachers, are often strongly orientated towards their prospective (or, in the case of postgraduates, current) profession, and are certainly very able to speak the language of professionalism, describing the purposes of reflection definitively in terms of practice:

*I suppose [reflection is] to improve practice, like, at the end of the day, it's got, in order to become a better ...professional, you've got to learn from your mistakes, so you've got to, at the end of the day, if you come away thinking 'I don't know something' or 'I did something and I'm not quite sure if there might have been a better way of doing it' then, when you reflect on it, you do find what other, well, when you're looking at other people's research, you find out perhaps better ways that you could have gone about things that just improves your practice. And also, even if*

*there's something positive that you're reflecting on, then it's also good as well then, because you think 'Oh well, I did it right, so in the future I will continue to do things like that', so whether it's something positive or something negative that you're looking at, it still helps to improve your practice. (Yvonne, student, UG)*

I asked Mona if she could see herself continuing to use her portfolio after graduation and her response, again, was orientated to the ways in which the portfolio is already 'about' professional requirements:

*Yes, I think so. I think it'd be, well, if I need to do ...something similar [at the end of next year], I think, at the end, and, having done it already, you know, all the links to the [professional] benchmarks, it will help me if I need to do it again, or for interviews. (Mona, student, PG)*

Dave described himself as his harshest critic of his reflective work and e-portfolio, but expressed his self-judgement as judgement about his employability. The ultimate measure of quality was whether he would be happy to show his portfolio to prospective employers:

*Dave (student, UG): the whole content including the blog itself, I would like to have had to a a standard that I would deem admissible you know to a prospective employer. So that that was the sort of thing I had in the back of my head...*

*Jen: so you may have been actually holding yourself to a an even higher standard that what would have*

*Dave: yeah, definitely, and the amount of time I actually spent on it I think it was was, it was far more than I had to.*

For Daniela, the evidence that she was getting her reflection and self-evaluation "right" was related to whether she was chosen for one of the prestigious placement years available to some students on her programme:

*Daniela (student, UG): some people can uh evaluate their skills too high and some people can underestimate there, so it's uh, and I think if you have an assessment actually part of an assessment it it helps you sort of to find the balance between to overestimate your your skills or to underestimate.*

*Jen: yeah. So how do you know when you're getting it right?*

*Daniela: Um, to to be honest I think if I got a placement year I got it right!  
[laugh]*

A discourse of professionalism, and the alignment of reflection with matters of employability, can lead students to take a competitive stance in their descriptions of their courses and their own place within them. Josie expressed this obliquely, discussing the rigours of the training and the high dropout rate as essential aspects of preparing students for a profession which not everyone would be cut out for:

*Josie (student, PG): it's such a tough job, and it's such tough training, that you have to weed people out, you know, and that, and that's what happened. If you couldn't hack that, then there's no way you would hack [the work], you know... I think it was about a 10% dropout, but there was only 45 of us to begin with. It was more than that, I'm sure it was more than that... So yeah, they are, you know, I wouldn't say 'ruthless', cause that sounds a bit aggressive, but, you know, they really are quite, you know, 'this is the criteria, and if you don't meet it, you don't get it'. Um, but you have to, because what is expected of you is so much when you go out there, that, if you can't do that, then there's no way you would manage it.*

Stewart was even blunter, wondering if he was at a disadvantage because his programme had processes in place to support less motivated students to do reflection and professional development planning:

*Stewart (student, UG): It's it's a fine line to press whether you you do it to get students involved or you don't and leave it voluntarily. I suppose in in my, as a student, it would benefit me if they didn't because it would mean that the competition when it comes to looking for jobs is is less.*

*Jen: [laugh] yeah.*

*Stewart: But, that's a rather cynical view. So are you effectively you know compressing the market and and stopping those who would take take PDP seriously from excelling, and those who don't, to fall behind.*

Stewart's ambivalence about supporting reflection, and his description of it as a competitive advantage, may appear to be at odds with the individual development and authenticity teachers believe they are fostering through reflective practices. It does, however, link these individual accomplishments to a broader context. In a context of enhancing professionalism, quality and employability through reflection,

measures of success may have less to do with personal growth than with getting on in a world where success is relative and not everyone can ‘win’.

I have shown in this section how reflection in professional education is intimately involved with its professional context, because of the priorities and allegiances of teachers and students, and how discourses of reflection shift to take account of professional priorities. The next section discusses how reflection is thought to produce the qualities that are professionally valued, through practices of repetition. Repetition through reflection is a form of performativity that is aimed at providing new professionals with the discipline to be ‘instinctively’ effective in practice.

### **“They’ll reflect and hopefully that will go into their muscle memory”: practice, persistence and performativity**

The metaphor of ‘muscle memory’ emerged as part of a conversation with Peter, who sparked this association for me during a discussion we had about surviving emergencies. Muscle memory, in its non-metaphoric sense, describes the motor learning that allows people to ‘instinctively’ or ‘automatically’ perform physical skills they have practiced repeatedly. Peter explained that people who are routinely in dangerous situations often practice emergency procedures over and over again so that certain actions and decisions become second nature. Otherwise, panic and adrenaline can make them do the wrong things. He noted that practice, in the sense of persistent and disciplined repetition, is part of what professional training and reflection is about:

*Peter (teacher, UG): Ensuring survival is by training people about what to do so it becomes second nature, so they don’t have to think, it’s almost like part of their bodily DNA.*

*Jen: Yeah. ...muscle memory.*

*Peter: Muscle memory, yeah absolutely. And it’s, so so the thing about [our] students being on placement is that what you’re hoping to do is that you’ll give them that muscle memory when they’re on placement. So they’ll be faced with a particular situation and they’ll respond to it and then they’ll unpack it and they’ll reflect upon that experience and hopefully that learning will be, you know, go into their muscle memory as well, so that*

*the next time they're faced with that situation or similar, or that they can generalise out from that one situation to another situation so that they can actually go into that as well.*

Peter distinguished this form of activity from “just writing about it” – and he was critical of trusting what can be assessed in the academic environment:

*We give people a case study and we say 'well how would you intervene in this' and what they do is they write about it. Now whether they would do that in reality you know, you don't know. Cause you're making judgment about what people write. And often there's a huge disparity between, you know, walking the walk and talking the talk. And ideally what you want students ...to do is to be able to to walk the talk. (Peter, teacher, UG)*

This concept of muscle memory – of “walking the talk” – is central to the matter of discipline, because it is through repetition that it is accomplished. Schön (1991) describes the “know-how” that allows practitioners to act spontaneously in novel situations:

*It does not stretch common sense very much to say that the know-how is in the action – that a tight-rope walker's know-how, for example, lies in, and is revealed by, the way he takes his trip across the wire... Although we sometimes think before acting, it is also true that in much of the spontaneous behavior of skillful practice we reveal a kind of knowing which does not stem from a prior intellectual operation. (pp.50-1)*

This know-how is both of, and revealed by, action. Metaphorically speaking, again, muscle memory of professional identity is developed in the same way as physical skill – through persistence and repetition. Persistence brings changes in approach and attitude. Some students described reflection as “discipline” and “habit”:

*The fact that it was assessed meant that I was more disciplined about doing it. ... I just set myself targets so that I would definitely aim to write in the blog twice a week and you know try to keep it to a manageable chunk so write 4 or 5 hundred words a time um and focus it on something different every time. So it gave me a, I suppose it gave me a an enforced discipline, that I might not otherwise have had. You know if I if I'd done it, if I was just doing it for myself and only I was reading it [pause] I don't know if I'd have managed to push myself to maintain it. (Lynne, student, PG)*

While Lynne indicated that it was the externally enforced discipline of writing reflectively that changed her way of approaching her studies, Kate found that reflection became a habit that was more self-motivated, but still governed by rules and a disciplined approach:

*I find it hard to find the time to do it sometimes. ...I don't want it just to be a 'oh, that was a tough week'. I need it to be more than that, if I'm going to use it like a revision. Um, so it is extra, it's finding extra time to do it... I would like to get more disciplined in that... it gets you into a habit of doing it which is important, so I did try and get into the habit of, before turning the page on to the next lesson, just making sure the last thing I did was a little reflection and I move on to the next one. (Kate, student, PG)*

For other students, the conscious, rule-bound discipline gives way to something else. When Josie began her course, she found reflection to be challenging:

*It took me a little while, cause I was writing a bit factually, and they wanted a little bit, you know, more depth than that, you know. 'Okay, so you know that, so now what are you going to do about it?' It was that kind of thing. Um so it did take me a few weeks, but, you know, you soon get into the swing of it, you know, what the tutors were expecting (Josie, student, PG)*

However, by the end of her course, the problem was “switching off”, rather than getting into the swing:

*Josie (student, PG): When you constantly process in that way, you know, that intensely for this length of time, it's very difficult to switch off. You know, so I used to go to bed, and I'd be thinking 'Right, oh, that's a good idea', you know. And short of getting out of bed and writing it down, I made myself not do that, but it was really, really difficult to stop doing it.*

*Jen: Yeah. You got going and you couldn't stop.*

*Josie: Yeah ...I've kind of had to shut my office and not look at anything. ...It's so much more than what you think it is, so, so much more. You can't even describe how much more it is.*

Josie's practice of reflection, initially somewhat foreign and a discipline to be mastered, eventually took over. The various aspects of reflection that she initially had to consider, such as teacher expectations, and questions that were carefully

articulated, were absorbed so that they were no longer separate from her processes of thinking.

Similarly, Theresa talked about moving from a starting point of confusion and dislike towards an appreciation, or at least an understanding, of her e-portfolio:

*Theresa (student, UG): I decided [the e-portfolio] was the spawn of the devil last year. [laughter] I just couldn't get my head round it and [pause] I don't think I um was able to use it to its full potential. Whereas now I understand it more and actually how important it is.*

*Jen: Mm. What do you think has made the difference for understanding that?*

*Theresa: Um, probably the pressure that we're under this year is a lot more than last year. And um [pause] oh I don't know. I just prefer it a lot more this year.*

Theresa's transformation from someone who didn't understand, to someone who did, is a matter of repetition, practice, and discipline. After a time, what it means to be reflective, or a professional, becomes second nature, and students cannot even really identify when or where the shift occurs. Natalie framed this as "internalising", and for her it was the goal of her students' reflective practice:

*I'm much more interested about in, in what the students internalise, rather than what they've written on a, I was going to say 'a piece of paper', a virtual piece of paper. (Natalie, teacher, UG)*

Maria discussed the process of internalising professional discourse:

*Maria (teacher, UG): [For the very young students], what did change over time is the way that they were recording 'I've had a crap day'. Um, you know, so it did start with, cause and the way that they write very often is using street speak.*

*Jen: [laugh] Like, like what?*

*Maria: Well, like you know, 'I've had a shit day'. You know just, just language that means something to them. ...But what they started to do is, you know, instead of putting 'I've had a shit day today', 'today's been rather challenging'.*

*Jen: [laugh]*

She went on to describe the sorts of things that students would begin to identify in their reflections, and how they learned to contextualise and analyse what had occurred. She listed the sorts of questions that became, over time, a “natural” part of the reflective writing process:

*It's part of the reflective process to actually look at, you know, the here and now and what's happened. And what might have influenced that. You know where's the concept of them as an individual in that? What issues were going on for them? And then separating out then, you know, wider issues in terms of, you know functional things that might have affected that intervention, you know policy, law, processes, systems. But also, where's the [client] in that? And what might have been going on for them and the impact of of the intervention on them. Um the student was able then to use that to start to analyse the situation and then think, 'right, what learning have I had from this situation? How might I have responded differently?'. (Maria, teacher, UG)*

What Maria is suggesting, I think, is that repetition, through reflection, of what she called “separating out”, analysis of students’ own practice and behaviours on placement, is the sort of discipline that changes both discourse and practice.

There is a tension here, however, in that students often come to professional programmes with extensive practice in writing academically. Their habits of academic writing conflict with the sorts of habits that produce ‘muscle memory’ for practice. This is a conflict that is exacerbated by the tendency of university programmes to demand academic, professional and personal discourses to come together in reflective writing. The next section explores how students both resist and persist in thinking and writing in a traditionally academic mode, and the complexities of this in relation to assessed reflective writing.

### **“They’ve continued with academic expectations of writing”: the discipline of academic discourse**

The nature of academic discourse, and how it belongs in reflective writing, varies considerably between disciplines and programmes, and different levels of expectation are placed on students’ ability to integrate modes of writing. Jess, who



taught on a postgraduate programme that mostly catered to working professionals, described what was expected of students and how they were disappointingly lacking in certain sorts of academic writing skills:

*There is an expectation that they have some, some skills generally that mean that, you know they, if they don't know, they can find out, um in that sort of way. What we're experiencing, in fact is that the students quite often do not have, or do not meet our expectations. I don't think we've got, you know, tremendously high expectations but they ...they let us down you know. (Jess, teacher, PG)*

She noted that a skill students were expected to have was the ability to find out how to write in genres they weren't already familiar with, including the genre of reflective writing. However, Natalie suggested that moving into a reflective mode – even moving to writing in the first person – can be challenging precisely because students have had another genre “drummed into them”:

*Natalie (teacher, UG): Maybe they've continued with a fairly sort of academic expectations of writing, of it being not, even if you're writing in the first person which you do in a reflective essay, you still don't I don't know, you might say 'I did this' or 'I did that' but that'd be it. You wouldn't then go on to really use the first person in, eh, or or the second person in that 'I did this, I did that' 'But what will you think?', that's not what you would you anticipate or expect in somebody's academic written assignment, so...*

*Jen: Yeah, so they kind of keep that feeling*

*Natalie: Yeah, I think so.*

*Jen: about their reflective writing?*

*Natalie: Yeah.*

*Jen: That's interesting, mm.*

*Natalie: We've, well, they've had that drummed into them for three [laughs] three years!*

Academic essay writing is a very challenging mode to master (Lillis, 2001), and once students have achieved a measure of competence in it, they can resist thinking about reflection in ways that would contradict the ideals of objective, logical and passive writing they have learned:

*Jen: Is it different, do you think, the kind of tutor-student relationship, when you're doing reflective writing as part of a programme, than it is on*

*a programme where you aren't? Like, are there, is it, do you need to trust the person who's going to be reading it, um, in a way*

*Beth (student, UG): No.*

*Jen: that's different from an essay? You don't think so?*

*Beth: No, no, I don't think so at all, because, although it's a reflective piece, it's got to be backed up by sort of hard evidence. So it's not just you reflecting daydreamily of, you know, of what you've been doing. You see something, you're reflecting on it, you have to use a model which is set in stone. That doesn't change, so that's like, you know, a strong guide, but you also have to back everything up with evidence. Um, so no, it's still an academic piece, it's it's still an experience you've had that you*

*Jen: That's really interesting, yeah.*

*Beth: Yes. But, but, no, you don't have to, I don't feel like you need to develop a trust, not at all, so, like, a strong academic piece of, you know, essay writing, just as it would be on a history degree or whatever, you know.*

Beth was emphatic that nothing she did in her reflective portfolio made her vulnerable, and insisted that by following a model “set in stone”, reflective writing could be just as academic as an essay. Perhaps this insistence should not be surprising, as a number of teachers also emphasised the structure and discipline that is involved in reflective writing. Bob described how reflective writing, while being non-traditional, carried expectations of “academic rigour”, along with sensitivity to practice issues and personal philosophy:

*It's not a traditional essay, but there are parts of it where, eh, you are looking for academic rigour. If you remember from the, the structure, it started off with a, an introduction and then a profile, and then something about their own ...philosophy... something about critical reflection on their [own] experience etc. In relation to the section on [professional] philosophy, what we're really after, in that particular session, is them to give us a, a description of their own developing value base, right, and also, eh, their own developing practice experience, and practice competencies. ...we're also expecting them to, to relate to the, the theory, whilst linking to the literature. And, in relation to the critical reflection, as I said, that's more orientated towards their, their... placement... So, really, uh, this idea of reflection and interlinking with theory and the literature, it's still regarded as a very much a, an academic piece of work although we do, we do look for that academic rigour in specific sections within their e-portfolio. (Bob, teacher, PG)*

This requirement to balance the personal, the professional and the academic is understandably tricky for many students, and might explain why teachers find they tend to err on the side of caution and lean towards traditional ‘academic’ prose, and ways of thinking, in their reflections.

Other students welcomed the opportunity to use their reflective spaces to move away from what they saw as the constraints of academic writing:

*Although I haven't done lots of academic writing before ...I know from what I've read that sometimes the formality of academic writing is such that you just, it's not always helpful, it just has to be in that structure because that is the, that's the norm and that is your way of showing that you've got however many years of academic experience ...I used to proofread some articles for my flatmate uh several years ago and his would be the same it would be stuff like 'well this is, this is really appalling English', but 'yes but that's international academic scientific language' and you read journal articles and you can see that, that going on but it's clear to read, but only if you're trained in that particular method of communication, and so the thing that I really liked about doing the blogging was it was something that didn't need to be in that level of formality, which I would have had a much bigger struggle with... it's a sort of easing in kind of thing it seemed useful to be able to be assessing what the course is about rather than only learning about the approvable, you know approved method of communication. (Megan, student, PG)*

Charles praised the blog format for its “liberating” qualities:

*I don't like the style that most academic papers are written in. I, that's not, I find it a contrived style, and I and I think that one's obliged to use it. And so I found it very liberating in the blog to be able to, as I said allow my identity to emerge. (Charles, student, PG)*

He observed that a different sort of voice “emerged” from his blog than he expected – one less formal and academic than “conversational”:

*Charles (student, PG): I didn't know when I started the blog what kind of identity would emerge. And the one that emerged wasn't necessarily what I what I would have guessed at.*  
*Jen: And how would you describe that identity that emerged?*  
*Charles: [pause] Um much more conversational, like we're having a conversation now, rather than academic*

Teachers were sometimes also ambivalent about the impersonal nature of academic discourse, and Maria summed these up by saying:

*We don't just want an academic debate, we want we want to hear the person, you know. (Maria, teacher, UG)*

This is not so easy, though, especially when reflection is being assessed, or is restricted in other ways, as Floyd found:

*Floyd (student, PG): I found that really tough to do, uh [pause] this business of, re, doing reflection and then having a deadline. Um, that, I the two don't, are not a, it's not a happy marriage, uh, trying to do, eh, trying to do reflective writing under time pressures, because I really found reflective writing, deep reflective writing based on, and at the same time, meeting the criteria of a, of the course... was really tough to do. Eh, it just seems*

*Jen: Tough in a good way, or tough in a bad way?*

*Floyd: Um, I, oh, I [pause] I think it was, in the end it was good, in the end it was good.*

After thinking about it for a moment, Floyd described the difficulty as being good “in the end”, echoing Theresa’s change of heart about her portfolio, and the point I made in the previous section about the disciplining of discourse that characterises professionalism. Nevertheless, the sense demonstrated in this section is that reflection is something quite different from, and maybe incompatible with, the kinds of writing practices that fit with academic requirements: “not a happy marriage”, as Floyd puts it. Reflective writing is framed as iterative, subjective and personal, while academic writing is often seen as separate (from research, or perhaps from experience), a neutral summary, and uncreative (Badley, 2009, p.209).

The ideal of perfect discipline and muscle memory that informs reflective practice is therefore undermined when competing expectations are placed on the reflective writing space. There is no real possibility of simplifying and streamlining these processes, however. Rather, it is a question of recognising the complexity of both the academic and the reflective writing genres (separately and together), and how each is informing the shaping, through practice, of students’ professional identities.

## Every possible confusion: professional reflection, discipline and supercomplexity

Penny observed that reflection is not necessarily a special genre, but is a challenging one to grasp:

*All modes of writing have culture attached to them but, eh, this is just, I would see it as having just a specific culture attached to it and it, it's a more difficult one to pin down, I think. (Penny, teacher, PG)*

It would seem, however, that professional reflection in higher education contexts has multiple cultures attached to it: at the very least, a culture of the particular profession or discipline, and a culture of academia (though, as noted already, these categories should not be seen as homogeneous across disciplinary contexts). The practices of reflection in professional higher education are challenging in situations where habits collide. Yancey (2004) is correct in saying that “what we ask students to do is who we ask them to be” (p.739), but we are not always constant in what we ask. This is not necessarily a problem – there is no “pure community” (Foucault, 1997, p.198) into which perfectly trained professionals can cross, and the fuzzy boundaries of practice make their way into students’ experiences of education through placements as well as through reflection. However, such inconstancy does seem to ask for a more nuanced approach to discipline.

Barnett’s (2000) theory of supercomplexity can usefully be brought into play here. Supercomplexity is “the outcome of a multiplicity of frameworks” (p.415), where “contestability, challengeability, uncertainty and unpredictability” (p.416) characterise the knowledge landscape. Barnett argues that it is important for higher education, and also for the professions, to change to take account of the demands of multiple frameworks. The “political dream” (Foucault, 1997, p.198) of a disciplined profession, and of disciplinary knowledge, gives way to “the capability of living effectively amid ...openendedness” (Barnett, 2006, p.52).

In reflective writing, professional knowledge does not appear to be displacing the academic (nor vice-versa). Instead, these knowledges are expected to co-exist.

Professional reflection in higher education is, by its nature, a space of supercomplexity, where “no longer are the boundaries, or the forms of right knowing clear” (Barnett, 2000, p.415). Professional reflective practice might therefore be a pedagogy that supports “the challenges of professional life”:

Higher education, if it is to be adequate to the challenges of professional life, has to incorporate moments of supercomplexity into the curriculum – such as situations bearing multiple descriptions and the handling of multiple identities and value conflict. (Barnett, 2006, p.53)

For Schön (1991), practice settings mirror such situations, and so what he calls “reflection-on-practice” can only benefit from more contestation and multiplicity:

When leading professionals write or speak about their own crisis of confidence, they tend to focus on the mismatch of traditional patterns of practice and knowledge to features of the practice situation – complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict – of whose importance they are becoming increasingly aware. ...if the art is not invariant, known and teachable, it appears nonetheless, at least for some individuals, to be learnable. (p.18)

Supercomplexity is a good theory to think with when reframing reflective practices for spaces, and subject positions, of conflict and instability. However, we must be careful about what we take to be the purpose of approaching reflection in this way, and take care that it does not simply replicate the humanist ideals of individual coherence and autonomy that supercomplex discourses challenge. For example, Barnett (2006) argues that the ultimate point of education in a supercomplex world is authenticity, not in the sense of uncovering an unchanging and stable self, but of making and remaking individuality:

If the world is continually changing, is continually presenting conceptual and value challenges, and continually calls us into new relationships with others, with technologies and social structures, then individuality has to be remade anew each day. ...the first task of higher education in an unstable world is to call students and course participants into a state of being in which they can contemplate identifying and expressing their individuality on a continually changing basis. (p.59)

This comes dangerously close to the ideals of continual development that were critiqued in Chapter 6. There is much to worry about in any conception of reflection that ignores circulations and relations of power, because relations of power in professional settings are so highly contested (see the second excerpt of this chapter's postscript for an example of these contested relations).

Foucault (1977a) observes that the tactics of exile and discipline began to merge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when "all authorities exercising individual control" began to effect "the constant division between the normal and the abnormal... by applying the binary branding and exile of the leper" (p.199). Elden (2003) describes this change as one of control: "instead of the exclusion *without control* of banishment... the space of exclusion is now rigidly regimented and controlled" (p.244). The panopticon, with its perfect visibility, stems from technologies of regimentation and control.

However, professional practice is still more like a plague-stricken town than a prison. It is a space of both supercomplexity and disorder, and this has been a problem for those whose vision of effective and quality practice involves panoptic surveillance and control. With no possibility of 'seeing' all that goes on in practice – with some still-autonomous spaces of engagement between teacher and student; client and social worker; nurse and patient – the instrument of reflection gains political traction where it is seen as a mechanism through which to control and regiment *from within* what is otherwise outside the scope of institutional control. For that reason, teachers in professional and vocational subject areas *must* acknowledge their own stake in reproducing practices of division, categorisation and regimentation through pedagogies of reflection, and must examine their practices from a political and discursive, not just an individual, perspective.

There is also, however, a value in thinking about what forms of selfhood *are* being expressed through reflection. In the next chapter, I look at how students and teachers describe transformation and time, and how we might understand this in a post-structuralist context.

## Postscript: quality, autonomy and reflection in two disciplinary contexts

This postscript sets two interview excerpts against one another to give a sense of how the disciplinarity of reflective practices works at a more specific level than the generalised discourses of professionalism discussed earlier in this chapter.

The first excerpt comes from a social work context. The interview took place at the same time that a progress report on protection of children in England was published (Laming, 2009) in the wake of the Climbié enquiry into the abuse and murder of a young girl in London who had been known to the social services of a number of local authorities. This was a period of intense scrutiny and criticism of social workers, and one of Laming's key recommendations was that:

the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families must immediately address the inadequacy of the training and supply of frontline social workers. (p.7)

He went on to say that “many social workers believe their training fails to prepare them for working with families in crisis” (p.14) and identified the shortage of qualified social workers as a serious failing in the arena of child protection (p.45).

The interviewee cited below spoke at length on this matter, remarking upon the relationship of their teaching to this broader professional and policy context, and connecting the visibility of student work within the e-portfolio to the need for quality assurance that Laming identified:

*It's ironic we had the recommendations from Laming yesterday that that you know, one of them is that there should be wider scrutiny of the um training programmes for social work. Um one of the reasons why I came into this job, um, was because I was concerned about the quality of some newly qualified social workers coming into practice. And you know as a manager of services we were having to deal with issues of competence and having to develop um newly qualified workers above and beyond what I thought we should be doing. So, you know part of my thought 'well, get in there and teach them, you know and and take some responsibility of ensuring that we get good quality practitioners'. Um I think one of the*



*benefits is for me, I think that because... we don't ask for actual evidence to be supplied by the students when they're out on placement, we rely heavily on the reports of their practice assessors to say that they've met the required standards, and yet it's us at the university who sign that off. Now I have a problem with, I don't like to sign something off unless I've been on that journey or experienced some of it. And that's not to say that I doubt our practice assessors, but for our second years very few practice assessors are qualified social workers. And, I I just th-, I kind of think, 'hang on a minute, do they really know the requirements of what's needed? From the profession?' Um, what the e-portfolio allows you to do is to see more of that journey and see the development for yourself. So it's meant that when I came in to mark these and to determine whether they were pass or fail, by the time I came to mark them, I'd seen the developments, I wasn't just seeing it as a final product, it was more of a process. Um, and that did raise a dilemma when we had our practice assessment panel, which is like a subgroup of the exam board, you know because I was saying that I could mark mine straight away, knowing what the outcome was without having to sit and read it from scratch, because I've read it as it's developed. Um, you know, and and in much the same way that managers in practice would through supervision of their staff.*

Many ideas and assumptions come together here: the sense of obligation to the profession that brings some professionals into teaching; the explicit linking of reflection with visibility; the role of non-professional academics in professional education contexts; and the nature of assessment of reflective writing. What connects these is this speaker's depiction of an uneasy alliance between the university and the social work profession, each with their own values, ways of knowing, methods of assessing skill and competence, and requirements, and all expected to co-exist. It should not be surprising, therefore, if students receive mixed messages about what it means to be a 'good' social work student. These mixed messages reproduce the academic and professional boundaries and confusions described in this chapter.

The second excerpt comes from an interviewee in an education context, who observed from their own experience working with teachers in further education that standards of reflection amongst teachers are often not high. They attributed this partly to the professionalisation of teaching in even non-professional courses, and the mismatch between how teachers of those subjects have come to *be* teachers and what teaching as a profession now encompasses:

*The background to the sector and these are the sort of people who have come in because they can make skirts or because they can knit or because they can paint ...It's very much that sort of practice based sector. And the engagement with theory very few and far between ...the whole professionalisation agenda is quite a culture shift with the sector as well. The fact that they've got to do CPD [continuing professional development] and they've got to, you know, reflect on how this has helped them etcetera is, is quite different for people, yeah.*

This interviewee identified a tension between teacher acquiescence to new models of professionalism – with their regimentation, administration and target-drivenness – and the expectation of and pleasure in autonomy that keeps people willing to do the job:

*Interviewee: We are, as teachers we are all fairly used to being told we have to do this and we have to jump through some more hoops, more tests. And we're a very accountable profession aren't we. Yeah so I think the, you know, the sort of rebellion is past.*

*Jen: [laughs] We're way past that now.*

*Interviewee: [laugh] Yes, think back to the sixties when we were all rebelling all over the place but yeah.*

*Jen: Yeah, yeah it's a bit sad in a way.*

*Interviewee: It is, yeah you're right. ...it's all more and more regimented. And we do more and more paperwork. And everything is measured on um achievement rates and success rate of learners. Yeah it's a mess really.*

*Jen: Yeah teachers don't any more have the expectation that they are going to have choices about how they [pause] proceed as professionals in the same way that I suppose they used to.*

*Interviewee: [pause] Yes although I do think a lot of the, I'm doing a research project ...which is looking at teachers' experiences in adult education. Um and they are all saying to me that they do still feel autonomous. They still feel that alright there's all this regimentation around figures and standards and things but they still feel when when they are in a classroom they are autonomous. And they can do what they like [laughs]. And they are right, you know, observed a lot but, once that classroom door closes the teacher is on their own. And always has been.*

*Jen: ...do you think that that keeps people in the profession who might otherwise not?*

*Interviewee: Huge factor cause it gives a real satisfaction yeah. We all get satisfaction from professional autonomy don't we. And that's, you know, but they and then on the other hand if they say 'well we don't like the salaries and we don't like the paperwork, this, that and the other'. But yeah that's probably a big factor in keeping them there, yeah.*

*Jen: ...I wonder what, what might happen as more and more teaching moves online and and that sense of being able to close the door and not be,*

*um, observed in action maybe recedes somewhat. I mean I know there is that sense of, you know, within the VLE situation or when, when every teaching interaction is recorded for posterity if you like. So that may change the way teach teachers feel about their autonomy.*

*Interviewee: It may well do. Um, I don't know what your experiences have been but certainly our experiences of teaching with the VLE are still very um sort of minimal I would guess.*

Again, issues of visibility are surfaced here, with the contested space of the material classroom providing teachers with a 'last stand' against the encroachment of regimentation, as represented by the compulsory reflective practices. The spectre of the digital becomes a great danger, as it threatens to subject even the relatively autonomous space of the classroom to the panoptic gaze of measurement, professionalism and accountability. A future strand of research that explored reflective practices in professional, post-education contexts would add much to an understanding of how reflection is wielded, resisted and co-opted in the service of accountability or autonomy.

## **Chapter 9: Transformation, shifting subjectivity, and time**

This chapter approaches the concept of transformation rather cautiously, and not accidentally last. There are two important threads in my interview data that have not yet been explored in depth: the changes in themselves that students describe in relation to the process of reflection, and both the necessity for and the pressures of time that appear to make reflection more or less meaningful and successful. These strands come together to form a compelling story about what ‘real’ reflection does, and what it needs. Unfortunately, this story about transformation and reflection poses several problems in the context of the arguments I have been making so far: it requires a humanist conception of the self (because of the intellectual history of transformative learning); it furthers the “practices of mystery” (Lillis, 2001) that I have been critiquing (because transformation is mystified and rarefied); and it denies webness (because of the way that speed, superficiality, and technology are conceived as intertwined).

In this chapter I propose an alternative way of looking at transformation and online reflection. This alternative has two main features that differentiate it from the story sketched above (and told below in more detail). First, it positions transformation as a matter of shifting subjectivity instead of ‘deep’, essential change. Second, it offers speed and digitality, or what I have been calling “webness”, as a generative mode in which to conduct risky posthumanist “gatherings” (Edwards, 2010). Each of these features will be described and discussed in this chapter. Here, as in other chapters, the vision of reflective practice that is proposed looks different – perhaps irreconcilably different – from much of what is currently understood as online reflection in higher education. This is both intentional and unavoidable as I seek a theoretical and pedagogical approach that is appropriate for high-stakes online reflection.

## **“It’s not just words”: the story of transformation**

In this section, I draw together some of the things that teachers and students told me about the impact of reflection, and the explanations they gave for the changes they saw in students or experienced in themselves. What is most striking is how inextricably the passage of time, time for reflection, and change and transformation are linked. For example, Lynne described taking time as the most significant aspect of reflection for her:

*I suppose the most important thing was taking the time to um I don’t know if articulate’s the right word but put into words or or to think about what I’d been reading or what I’d been doing and then I suppose the act of being reflective um, trying to put into words what, what I thought about it.  
(Lynne, student, PG)*

For Lynne, who described herself as usually being “lazy” about articulating her responses to her studies, the high-stakes nature of the reflection on her course supported her to carve out the necessary time to understand the course material:

*The reflective nature of it but also the sort of the regularity and the discipline and actually the the act of writing that stuff down to communicate it to somebody else meant that I was understanding it better.  
(Lynne, student, PG)*

For some students, the experience of change is emotional as well as intellectual. Towards the end of our interview, Mona spoke of becoming attached to her portfolio:

*I’m quite fond of my portfolio. ...It’s a kind of end of a year that, I didn’t think it might, it would end! ...it’s not just words... it’s kind of, yeah, it kind of reflects on the whole, quite a long and emotional and hard year.  
(Mona, student, PG)*

Mona saw her reflective writing as a representation of a year of experiences that had transformed her. Perhaps predictably by now, she went on to qualify her fondness in the terms of assessment: “I haven’t had any feedback on my e-portfolio, it might all be complete rubbish”. And she wished she could have done more:

*Mona (student, PG): I did enjoy it, and it did [pause] I wished I had more time during my placement to actually be reflective ...and, um, yes, I think, to some extent, I didn't have enough time to do that, so. So it means that, you know, I found it valuable, and I wish I had had the time.*

*Jen: If you'd had more time, what, um, what would you have done more of?*

*Mona: Just, um [pause] look at individual [projects] and think about, you know, more about each one and how to move forward, and do better.*

More reflection, for Mona, would have led to additional beneficial change in her practice. Perhaps there could never be enough time, and a reflective text is always partial and insufficient. However, her conclusion about what reflection has given her was a sense of the passage of time that is “not just words”, but a text that captures and produces pleasure and pride. This pride was echoed by several other students, including Dave. Dave associated his pride with a dawning sense of what he accomplished during his professional placement, and described revisiting parts of his portfolio again as a pleasurable process:

*I'm not quite sure whether it's actually sank in how much I actually did over that placement but it is beginning to and I do, you know I do sort of look back at the [portfolio], I'm quite proud of it, and I do sort of dip in and out of all the blogs and stuff and yeah, it's yeah, yeah so I am quite pleased with it. (Dave, student, UG)*

I spoke with Dave and Mona around the end of their respective courses. Adele's experience of reflection on a course that had ended several months before our interview suggests that this feeling of closeness and attachment to reflective writing may not always be lasting. For Adele, once the reflective period was over it quickly faded into the past:

*It's interesting how quickly it's... a thing of the past because, um, you know once, when you're still writing it it's more constantly on your mind when you think 'oh, I have to do my next entry soon' and it's never very far from my consciousness, but um as with all modules and all things like that, once I finished, it is quite quick that you turn to other things. (Adele, student, PG)*

We saw in Chapter 4 how Adele thought of her reflections as being unavailable for further work once she made them available to be viewed by her teacher. Here she seems to be saying that reflection is of the moment – a fleeting experience. I will explore this idea more in the section on time in higher education. However, several of my interviewees mentioned understanding the learning process better when reflecting after some time had passed:

*Doing it now, I'm sort of reflecting back on my work experience thinking 'oh that's why they did that!'. It's all sort of slotting in to place. (Theresa, student, UG)*

Similarly, Wendy reported that the same students who complained about the difficulty of reflection came to see its benefits later on:

*[They] really thought we worked them too hard with reflection. ...they were sort of saying 'This is far too much work, why are we doing it, blah, blah, blah'. In the course evaluations, at the end, it was, um [pause] 'So glad that you've, eh, you made us do this, um, we really feel that we've got somewhere with it'. (Wendy, teacher, UG)*

This is an indication, perhaps, that reflection itself takes some time to get to grips with, which Mona also commented on:

*Jen: Did you feel that it came, once you kind of understood what it was about, does it, does [reflection] come quite naturally for you?*  
*Mona (student, PG): Um, no, I wouldn't say naturally, but slowly.*

Assessing reflection, too, takes time. In fact, according to Helen (a student who is also a teacher), it is a process that requires observation over a period of time:

*I don't think [reflection is] visible in a sort of one off going in to look. But if you've observed somebody and given them a satisfactory grade and then the ne- you've given them some advice and next time you go back and they've got a good, yeah, then you, you can sort of extrapolate and say 'oh well okay they must have thought about what we said and they've addressed these things, they've changed the way they do things, they've added new techniques or whatever. So clearly there's been some reflection in action going on here'. (Helen, student, PG)*

While time is framed as essential for producing, understanding and assessing reflection, various factors would seem to work against the ‘proper’ speed at which reflection should take place. I discussed with Penny whether the assessment of reflection might encourage students to view it as a short-term process, when in fact the benefits might be greater later on. She agreed, and said:

*I’m trying to encourage them to think of using these as tools to see how far they’ve come, ra-, and within a six month course, you know, there’s, you can see some development but you won’t see very much because you’re too close to it. (Penny, teacher, PG)*

Reflection was sometimes also viewed by students as being less important to teachers than teachers claimed, because they did not allow enough time for it. Josie described herself and her classmates as “drowning in other stuff” and unable to prioritise reflection:

*I don’t know whether that could have been presented in a different way somehow, um, because everybody, I mean, I didn’t leave it till the last minute, I did mine in my Easter holidays, but still, that’s coming towards, you know, the end of the programme, to some degree. ...if it’s that important, you know, if it’s that important, I’m not sure that’s the right place to put it, because it’s an assignment, and it, whilst they did say you should be doing this over the year, that, you know, people kind of ignored that. (Josie, student, PG)*

For Jess, the tendency of students to be strategic in their learning is natural, but to her the solution was more encouragement and, importantly, more time, to take a “deeper” approach:

*Because people have very limited time, you know, they they want to get their qualifications, they are often doing surface or strategic learning, and deep learning actually is a a conflict with those things and is demanding. Is personally and time, um, you know, hungry, isn’t it? So unless they are encouraged and really motivated and see the value of it for themselves, and also are given the time or have the time to do it, then they won’t. (Jess, teacher, PG)*



This circular argument – that the solution to being busy is to prioritise reflection more, and the way teachers know students have prioritised is if students find more time – leads to a sense of futility. It may also lead to a culture of blame which suggests that students who do not take or make time for reflection are lacking compared with an ideal which may not, as we will see in the section on time in higher education, really exist. This paradox is symptomatic of other, more serious problems with the concept of transformation. In the next section I will discuss these problems, and show what an alternative discourse, in the form of shifting subjectivity, might look like.

### **“By the end of my paragraph, I could have changed completely”: reflection and shifting subjectivity**

Mezirow (2000), whose work on transformative learning theory has been very influential in recent years, claims that:

[a] crucial mode of making meaning [is] becoming critically aware of one's own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation. (p.4)

Reflection as part of a transformative learning philosophy is designed to get students to be able to ‘stand outside’ themselves and see how their beliefs and assumptions are formed, and how they could be different. Moon (1999b) describes stages of reflective learning, with “transformative learning” being the most advanced, where students:

are capable of evaluating their frames of references, the nature of their own and others' knowledge and the process of knowing itself. (p.146)

This contrasts with how students may be inclined to see themselves. In their study of undergraduate students' use of personal development planning and experiences of time, Clegg and Bufton (2008) found that students see aspects of themselves as fixed:

For some students the selves they project in these accounts is of an underlying self which is not susceptible to radical change, even when set alongside very detailed accounts of the ways their mode of being made things very difficult for them. They acknowledged that they would perform better were they to adopt different strategies but in practice felt that they were unable to change the ingrained dispositions of the ‘always’ being like that. (p.10)

Theorists of transformative learning would likely respond that these students have “assimilated” certain values, and that these values require “critical review”:

Critical reflection implies undergoing a transformation of perspective. Many of our actions are governed by a set of beliefs and values that have been almost unconsciously assimilated from our experiences and environment. To undergo a change in perspective requires us to recognize and change these presumptions. (Kember et al., 2008, p.374)

The assumption here is that these “unconscious” beliefs are amenable to recognition and change. This is tricky territory, and even those who take an explicitly Foucauldian approach to analysing subjectivity, such as Zembylas (2003), can be susceptible to the appeal of “transformation” in the guise of rule-breaking. People can, he argues:

overcome the emotional rules that make them objects, to negotiate new positions and new emotional rules in their professional lives. This perspective encourages [them] to think and ‘author’ themselves differently, to ask not only how emotion discourses and performances have cut them off from their desires but also how these have installed alternative desires and habits that they take on as part of themselves. (p.125)

Even as Zembylas maintains that “we need to challenge the widespread notion that self-disclosure constitutes a knowing of one’s self”, he is still able to describe “dramatic transformations” of subjectivity “through the power relations and the resistances that the self reshapes through performances that create greater freedom” (*ibid*). However, the metaphor of “rules” that can be “authored differently” suggests a self that is not fully constituted by these rules. This is challenging, since as we have seen in previous chapters, a Foucauldian analysis of power and subjectivity is not really compatible with an emancipatory rhetoric of ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ desire or

voice: “the notion of modern democratic governance is inseparable from self-discipline, [so] it is impossible to draw a line between an authentic experience of reflection and what has already been socialized and disciplined” (Fendler, 2003, p.21). Indeed, a related Butlerian reading of identity would suggest that rules and their repeated performance are what constitutes perspective in the first place (Atkins, 2005, p.254), a position that resonates with the arguments made in the previous chapter about practice and discipline.

Reflection cannot, therefore, be about transformation where a ‘real’ self is able to emerge by shedding the assumptions that hold it back. This reading of reflection is, however, extremely alluring. In our interview, Sam talked about reflection as “undoing the script” that disempowers students:

*[Reflection is] actually about recognising who you are and where you are. Okay? And actually just taking some time to go ‘hang on a minute. I can’. And actually recognising that things don’t have to be the way other people try and enforce them on us. Okay? So it it sort of gives you an opportunity to [pause] undo the script if you like. (Sam, teacher, UG)*

Like the ‘rules’ described above, Sam’s “script” suggests an externally imposed way of being that can be undone by “taking some time” for reflection. Sam admitted to not fully understanding how this works, but knew that it did:

*If somebody asked me to dissect the magic of it I can’t tell you, I just tell you it’s it’s a blend of things, and I can’t tell you the proportions it’s like cooking... it’s an intuitive response to what’s needed I suppose. (Sam, teacher, UG)*

Reflection here is described as a magical process of empowerment and emancipation. Sam described fine tuning the “ingredients” of the recipe to keep the magic flowing, but I am not sure that it is helpful to mystify reflection and its workings to this extent. If ‘real’ reflection is positioned as a magical state of enlightenment, our ability to critically examine it is limited. As we have already seen, a lack of critical perspectives contributes to the “practices of mystery” (Lillis, 2001) that disadvantage students in their approaches to high-stakes reflection.

In my view, transformation has to be understood as a matter of shifting subjectivity, not as deep changes to an essential selfhood. Subjectivity is best understood as always in process, and so shifts are commonplace, part of the negotiations that take place as a result of the discursive nature of subjectivity:

Subjectivity is a discursive effect, a character in a story as much as the 'author' of the story. Representations of the self, instead of being seen as 'truth', need to be seen more usefully as stories, often very powerful stories, which perform a variety of social functions, including the construction of selves with appropriate characteristics. ... Subjectivity is never a once-and-for-all construction, and the experience that meaning can have is never permanently fixed. ... Subjectivity is therefore always shifting and uncertain and has to be continually 're-formed'. (Usher, Bryant, & Johnson, 2002, p.88)

By approaching subjectivity as a process, we can demystify transformation and view it as a response to the uncertainty and iterativeness of subjectivity. To initiate, and then channel, these shifts in a particular direction could be seen as the purpose or project of both reflection and education more broadly. This is a purpose that may still be complex and contestable, but which at least has the benefit of being open to analysis.

The metaphor of the mask helps here, by alluding to transformative rituals that are about performance, display and subjectivity:



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Since Masks are themselves transformations they are used also as metaphors-in-action, to transform events themselves or mediate between structures. That is why they so often appear in rites of passage. In particular they are often conductors, exemplars and operators in those innumerable initiation sequences which enact the death of the old self and the rebirth of a new one. (Tonkin, 1979, p242)

By changing face, masked individuals enact the stories of their culture and the passage between states of subjectivity. These are social, formal and performative rituals. In reflective writing, we could consider the writing itself as the ritual mask – the engine of initiation that Tonkin describes.

Students and teachers describe reflection in ways which could be compatible with this understanding of transformation. For example, some of my interviewees described reflective writing as a process of developing ideas and understanding. This aligns with the work of Richardson (1994), who talks about writing as a process of transformation through developing insight. Kate explained the benefit of reflective writing in much the way that Richardson describes, as a method of inquiry:

*The writing process certainly helps, I think... by the end of my paragraph, I could have changed completely, just because the process of writing seems to help me inform my opinion. (Kate, student, PG)*

Eileen said that reflective writing provided her with a shift of subjectivity in the form of seeing her own behaviour through another's perspective. She described the process as making her less "selfish":

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<sup>21</sup> Stock image by stellalevi, <http://www.istockphoto.com>

*Eileen (student, UG): I think [reflection] makes you more aware how you work and how you are. And, um [pause] it [pause] it sort of teaches you not to be selfish, I suppose, because you you do sort of end up, um, considering how what you've done or what you've said affects other people.*

*Jen: That's interesting. Yeah, I never, yeah, I never thought about it like that before.*

*Eileen: No, because I think that you, you can do things and you don't even, if you don't consider the impact of what you've done, then, um, if you'd done something that, let's say, wasn't quite right or has offended somebody then, unless you're actually sit and analyse it, how are you going to change your behaviour?*

For Eileen, these were emotional or even moral shifts – ontological rather than epistemological. There is a sense of riskiness here, because the changes that are taking place are highly personal. Indeed, Dave explained that transformation was not a safe or comfortable experience. He described himself as having been “stretched” by his experiences:

*I don't think it would be a proper degree or it wouldn't be a proper course or it wouldn't be a proper job at the end of it unless there was an element of stress and an element of you know sort of soul searching and ... this degree probably stretches me to a sort of to a level which is slightly uncomfortable which is probably a good thing. (Dave, student, PG)*

The element of stress that Dave describes, and the discomfort of being changed by the experiences of his course, was seen as “proper” and probably beneficial. In the final section of this chapter, I will discuss risk and discomfort more, in the context of speed and webness.

First, though, I want to look in more detail at the association of reflection with contemplation, integration and introspection in time-rich contexts. In the next section, I will explore the notion of time, and argue that the fantasy of “slow time” (Eriksen, 2001), so vital to ideals of reflection and to higher education more generally, obscures the actual practices of teachers and students.

## **“And time, who’s got enough time? Nobody.”: time, online reflection, and higher education**

The literature on reflection in formal learning generally assumes an ample supply of time, and positions students as time-rich. There can therefore be no reason that prevents students from ‘making time’ to reflect, other than a lack of commitment to the process. This vision of the privileged student, one with nothing to do other than study, fits poorly with the experiences of most of my interviewees. Although much has been written about time pressures in the university, generally these are construed as impacting primarily on academics (Crang, 2007). However, even full-time undergraduates, these days, are likely to be working in addition to studying (Callender, 2008), and many mature and part-time students bring careers, families and complex life situations into the mix (Yorke & Longden, 2008). Furthermore, the experience of placements for students on programmes with a professional focus (as all of those in my study have) is generally also one of significant time pressure.

In addition to these demographic, disciplinary and societal factors, work on the changing nature of higher education emphasises the seemingly endless acceleration and compression of time itself in a globalised, technological world. In the current climate, academics lament the theft of time resulting from neo-liberal reframing of academic work and higher education as matters of efficiency, effectiveness and output. Workloads are increasing, administration is taking up a larger proportion of time, and consumer-students are becoming more demanding (Archer, 2008). Furthermore, intrusive and instrumentalising technology is blamed for the disappearance of peace, privacy and introspection, while the pre-digital age is held up as a haven of contemplation for both teachers and students (Levy, 2007; Menzies, 2007). This broader connection between time and technology has been forcefully made by Virilio (2007) and Eriksen (2001).

Virilio’s (2007) work has been orientated towards the acceleration and compression of time which is ultimately in the service of the military-industrial complex:

Let's make no mistake: whether it's the drop-outs, the beat generation, automobile drivers, migrant workers, tourists, olympic champions or travel agents, the military-industrial democracies have made every social category, without distinction, into *unknown soldiers of the order of speeds* – speeds whose hierarchy is controlled more and more each day by the State (headquarters), from the pedestrian to the rocket, from the metabolic to the technological. (pp.136-7)

For Virilio, one of the most dangerous aspects of speed is what it does to our sense of place:

“To be” used to mean to be somewhere, to be situated, in the here and now, but the “situation” of the essence of being is undermined by the instantaneity, the immediacy, and the ubiquity which are characteristic of our epoch. Our contemporaries will henceforth need two watches: one to watch the time, the other to watch the place where one actually is. (Oliviera, 1996, online)

Deeply suspicious and critical of technology, he relates automation and the “miniaturization of action” to the end of the “finite world” (Virilio, 2007, p.156). However, his “reliance on idealized notions of the human subject” (Bartram, 2004, p.295) leads him to a simplistic separation of subject from object which Actor Network Theory, in particular, has challenged in recent years:

Absolute spaces and times are meaningless [from an actor network theory perspective]. Agency is a purely relational process. Technologies only have contingent, and diverse, effects through the ways they become linked into specific social contexts by linked human and technological agency. (Graham, 1998, p.178)

Eriksen's theory of fast and slow time is equally susceptible to charges of oversimplification, but focuses more on the sorts of losses that affect individual reasoning and learning. His theory describes the disappearance of 'slow' principles of order, completeness and deliberation. These principles are understandably seen as important to higher education, so talk of their disappearance marks a crisis in institutional identity for the university.



Land (2006, 2011) has applied Eriksen's theory to practices of networked learning and the concept of the digital university. He asks whether networked learning and Web 2.0 is inevitably a product of fast time, which replaces slow time (Eriksen, 2001, p.68), destroying contemplative, sequential modes of thinking and writing in favour of speed and superficiality:

Web 2.0 practices seem caught in an awkward tension, if not disjunction. The pedagogical claims made for them seem to be located within, and to require the integrative and deliberative logic of, what Eriksen characterises as slow time. As digital phenomena, however, they increasingly serve to constitute fast time, can only accelerate in their future *modus operandi*, and reinforce the dromocratic principle that fast time drives out and occupies the place of slow time. (Land, 2011, pp.64-5)

Land (2006) contrasts "fragmentation" with "integration", and emphasises the importance of integration in "learners' construction of new conceptual understandings within disciplinary contexts, and the transformative effect that such new understandings bring" (p.6). He argues that only "integration" leads to transformative learning, and asks if "the long hallowed academic prerequisites of slow time, reflection, tranquillity, and solitude" are becoming irrelevant to a new "generation" of learners immersed in digital practices (2011, p.68).

Where transformation is viewed as inextricably linked to slow time, resistance to or denial of the digitality of online reflective spaces would appear to be the only option for teachers and students who wish to preserve the notion of transformation in their practices. The ways in which online reflective practices are framed by teachers and students as unweblike (as we saw in Chapter 5) may be in part a response to a belief that they rightly belong to slow time and therefore cannot be in and of the web.

However, it may be the case that contemporary higher education is doing the work of squeezing out 'slow time' regardless of teachers' adoption, or otherwise, of digital environments for reflection. As Clegg (2010) has pointed out:

there is a major contradiction in the claims for 'reflection' in higher education which assumes slow time. The fast time of the academy and the

‘empty future’ of policy imply a very different conception of reflection. This form of reflection looks to the future as something to be filled with employable subjects and new discoveries. The forms of planning and reflection involved are also inescapably competitive, individualistic, and oriented to exchange value not use value. (pp.358-9)

Understandably, there is resistance to this vision of ‘fast reflection’. I do not wish to deny the value of contemplation, nor to undermine the important insights about the relationship of neo-liberal political economies, speed, efficiency and the depletion of resources both human and natural that both Eriksen, and Virilio in particular, point to. However, teachers and students are not experiencing ‘slow’ time in very many aspects of their reflective practices. What they are experiencing is anxiety in relation to the *lack* of slow time, and doubt as to the value of what they can do in the kind of time they have available.

What different sorts of possibilities can speed and fragmentation bring? Land (2011) suggests two: that “alternative contemplative and creative spaces” might be forged from the digital, or that higher education “might develop new forms of subjectivity that accommodate states of almost perpetual liminality, or, at least, quickly shifting provisional stabilities” (p.69). Both of these possibilities are explored in remainder of this thesis.

In the next section, I seek to frame speed in a generative way. I offer some thoughts about an alternative vision for online reflection that can be fast, weblike, fragmented and experimental by design, not by accident. The concept of the “placeholder”, as it emerged in a couple of my interviews, may help in linking current thinking with this alternative vision.

Natalie and I discussed the matter of time in relation to reflection, observing that principles of reflection-on-action (Schön, 1991), as embedded in online reflective practices, imply that there will be a ‘later’ in which to really examine and consider things. In contrast, the only time for reflection is very often during, or immediately after, an incident or event:

*Natalie (teacher, UG): There's stuff you can't look at til later and then unfortunately later comes and there is no time. And sometimes, to be able to sort the wheat from the chaff, ...you need that bit of time and space ...to help you review or reflect on the experience and then maybe come to some, a different conclusion or, eh, make more sense of it, um, when the thing's not so raw and fresh in your mind. ...And time, who's got enough time? Nobody.*

*Jen: Nobody [laughs]. Yeah, so in a sense, sometimes we're kind of collecting stuff up, with a view to looking at it later, and there isn't going to be a later, really.*

*Natalie: ...you're reflecting whilst you're actually doing it. I don't know whether that's good, bad or indifferent, but it's better than nothing.*

*Jen: Yeah. Does the e-portfolio, or the portfolio model, really support that kind of reflection in action?*

*Natalie: ...No. Um, it would support the student reflecting on [pause] what had happened. ...and most e-portfolios are PC based... you're in the middle of a stressful situation – 'Just hold on, while I just log on to [my e-portfolio] so I can reflect in action'.*

Natalie suggests that there is a value in putting ideas and experiences aside for a while – to allow them to become less “raw and fresh” before reflecting on them – but that this value cannot be taken advantage of in the context of a higher education course or programme because there is so little time available. Penny made a similar point, talking about even longer timescales:

*The reflective parts of the [assignments], they're doing it as they're doing the course and I'm not sure that that's the best point at which they should be reflecting. Um, it's as I say that, only 20 years later, have I worked out why we did certain things in a certain way for [a course I took] ... when you're reflecting as you're doing a course, for example, you're having a learning experience, you're [pause] kind of putting in a placeholder. (Penny, teacher, PG)*

The idea of immediate reflection as a “placeholder”, as Penny described it, aligns with the comments made earlier by Dave and Mona about appreciating later on what they had done, when they returned to their reflections after the end of their course. The persistence of some online reflective environments could support this, as Megan suggested when talking about being able to access past knowledge and reflection through the blog search facility:

*The blog's very useful for being able to go back and sort of going 'okay so that's what I thought about that' or 'that's what I meant', and you can sort of search through the text and so it sort of, it became more evident that it was useful. (Megan, student, PG)*

In this sense, the traditional notion of slow, contemplative reflection may be replaced by alternative modes of reflection more appropriate to the digital, and to the notion of shifting subjectivity. Clegg and Bufton (2008) observe that time, in the sense of “time management” and “organisational skills”, is of central importance to students in their understanding of their own learning and development. Rather than viewing this as a superficial or ‘surface’ concern, as much of the literature on personal development planning does, the authors suggest that “time itself might be much more complex than appears and that wrestling with time constitutes a major and necessary preoccupation for students” (p.14). The same observation can be made in relation to ‘placeholder’ reflection – it may disguise complex practices and preoccupations. The placeholder could provide a new way of thinking about reflection as a series of standalone fragments of content that function across and through time, that can be repeatedly returned to, remixed, reconfigured and worked with. This concept will be explored in the concluding chapter.

Hemmi, Bayne and Land describe the volatile communicative landscapes of social media as products of speed and fast time, contrasting this with the “cloistered, analogue academy” that requires “slow time” and “reflection” (Hemmi, Bayne, & Land, 2008, p.29). They suggest, though, that there are “potentially radical and challenging effects of the new media formations” (*ibid*), and that universities may be starting to work with (as well as against) these. It does not seem that online reflective practices in higher education have yet embraced the radical challenges of speed and volatility. Speed may bring some valuable rewards: the energy and freedom to experiment, for example. Could ‘fast time’ and online reflection be seen differently? And what would the consequences be, if so?

## **“The exercise of the blog was to take some risks”: speed, experimentation and bricolage in online reflection**

Tensions and uncertainties around online subjectivity were discussed at length in Chapter 2. Attachment to ‘slow’ time, and its importance in reflection, has prevented certain sorts of conversations about online reflection from taking place. Many current learning theories are inadequate to address “the complexities of agency, discursive practice, identity and subjectivity within virtual learning environments” (Land & Bayne, 2002, online). Humanist theories which underpin reflection:

posit learners primarily as unified and stable subjects. Such analyses tend to emphasise and privilege notions of interior processing (the ‘deeper’ the learning the better) and cognitive restructuring. Transformation is sought to a more reflective ie more fully interiorised, individualised and unified subject. (*ibid*)

However, in framing online subjectivity as a space of liminality, we can get a glimpse of what a weblike reflection could be like. Meyer and Land (2005), in their writing about threshold concepts, suggest the concept of liminality as a space where subjectivity is in flux: “Liminality appears to be a ‘liquid’ space, simultaneously transforming and being transformed by the learner as he or she moves through it” (p.380).

Land (2006), as we saw in the previous section, suggests that ‘fast time’, associated with digitality, is incompatible with the sorts of “integration and synthesis” that take place in a liminal space (p.6). However, digital environments can be, and often are, spaces where liminality and liquidity are foregrounded because of the instability of digital texts, of authority and of self-representation. As Bayne (2010) argues, “when used well, [volatile digital spaces] open us to vibrant new domains where generative intellectual uncertainties might be nurtured” (p.7). Intellectual uncertainty need not stop at the door of reflection. Indeed, to assume that it does is to reify and disguise the nature of subjectivity, which is a matter of “liminal transformation”, as Haraway (2007) puts it:

To recognize ‘oneself’ as fully implicated in the world, frees us of the need to root politics in identification, vanguard parties, purity and mothering. ... This is not just literary deconstruction, but liminal transformation. Every story that begins with original innocence and privileges the return to wholeness imagines the drama of life to be individuation, separation, the birth of the self, the tragedy of autonomy, the fall into writing, alienation. (p.54)

In contrast, a cyborg or posthumanist reading of subjectivity foregrounds entanglements of conditionality:

Central to [a] post-human condition could be (rather than should be) entanglements in the world that entail practices of conditionality, including fallibility – experimentation and the possibility of failure (i.e. things falling apart) and responsibility – responding to others and otherness. (Edwards, 2010, p.7)

A digital sensibility, as explored at the end of Chapter 5, might push us towards theories of posthumanism that would see transformation as an increasing awareness of the lack of boundaries between ourselves and our worlds. Digital environments can be disruptive spaces that demand a reflexive stance (Macleod & Ross, 2011). When these sorts of issues are allowed to emerge (and often they are not, as we also saw in Chapter 5), they can propagate shifts in subjectivity for both students and teachers. In this sense, perhaps we should back away from aligning digitality with negative ‘fast time’, and instead consider it in terms of generative liminality and speed. Instead of seeking transformation to greater unification and interiority, which is the goal of humanism, the speed and looseness of digital flows presents an opportunity to look towards fragmentation, gatherings and a posthumanist sensibility.

Speed also gives us small, fleeting openings through which to experiment, to take risks, and to create work that is ephemeral and liminal by design. The concept of ‘bricolage’ might contrast here with a slow time approach of ‘scaffolding’<sup>22</sup>. Where scaffolding is about stability, safety, caution and protection, bricolage is about

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<sup>22</sup> Thanks to my colleague, Mae Shaw, for suggesting this connection.

experiment, precariousness, and unlikely combinations of ideas or materials. Scaffolding can be problematic if it creates constraint, as we saw in Chapter 7, and also because attempting to stage concepts in a safe and slow way can produce oversimplifications that prevent more complex understandings from emerging:

When teachers introduce, or ‘scaffold’, a naïve version of a threshold concept (in that it is a deliberately simplified and limited delineation), it seems to act to a certain extent as a proxy for the threshold concept. But... the concept offered appeared to have an enchanting, beguiling or ensnaring effect, simultaneously promising understanding but curtailing it at the same time by seeming to close down further avenues of enquiry or complexity. (Meyer & Land, 2005, pp.381-2)

Bricolage, in contrast, welcomes experimentation and complexity. The term emerged from Levi-Strauss’s (1966) anthropological work on what he saw as contrasting (‘western’ and ‘primitive’) conceptions of scientific method, but has since been applied in a number of contexts, including learning. Turkle and Papert (1990), observing children learning to write computer code, describe “bricoleurs” as having an orientation towards writing that is characterised by play:

Their work at the computer is marked by a desire to play with the elements of the program... The bricoleur resembles the painter who stands back between brushstrokes, looks at the canvas, and only after this contemplation, decides what to do next. For planners, mistakes are missteps; for bricoleurs they are the essence of a navigation by mid-course corrections. (p.136)

In Chapter 7, in my discussion of the value of the blank page, I described the anxiety that comes along with starting continually from scratch, and called this a necessary part of being a writer. Speed and digitality might make this process less intimidating, if it is viewed as a process of continual experimentation undertaken with a light, quick touch. Chandler (1998, online) emphasises the iterativeness of web based spaces of self-expression:

No version of the resulting text need be regarded as final – completion may be endlessly deferred in the medium in which everything is always ‘under construction’. Bricolage is not merely a ‘reflection’ of the bricoleur, since long-term engagement in regularised practices may also contribute to

shaping the user's values. Bricolage may transform the bricoleur as well as the materials.

Many creative writing manuals advise exercises that foreground speed and experimentation over careful construction, for the very reason that they provoke creativity and lateral – perhaps liminal – thinking (Goldberg, 2005).

Some students do describe taking risks in the online reflective environment. Alex characterised his blog in terms of the risks he was willing to take there, as opposed to in a discussion board with peers:

*Alex (student, PG): I suppose it's a different style of communication as well where you can write things that you haven't formalised as well as you might have on the discussion board, so it was good to be able to be wrong a bit more than you could be in the discussion board.*

*Jen: Yeah. What do you mean by wrong?*

*Alex: Well, take a risk and say something that you weren't sure about. ...you could say, um 'this is an idea I'm tossing around and it might be really stupid', but [pause] you could kind, you felt a bit more comfortable doing that... my tutor ...would encourage that kind of risky thinking anyway, cause he knew that that was the exercise of the blog was to to take some risks and and experiment with your ideas.*

The reflective space as a space of “tossing around” ideas, of experimentation with a light touch, of risk that is not really too risky because it is fragmented and fast, would seem to fit well with digital environments. Digital environments which are truly digital – which allow for hypertext and for multimodality – are even more amenable to experimentation. For Peter, the online reflective space contrasted favourably with the “turgid” work students produce in paper form:

*Students have to provide evidence that they've met these [professional standards]. And traditionally they do, they've done this, in the programme I'm working in and most [similar] programmes up and down the country... is by writing lots of text... And generally speaking these documents are very turgid and not really very easy to read, and they don't give a very clear indication of the student's um, what the student's actually been about... by the time you've read number six or number seven you know you, you've lost the will to live. (Peter, teacher, UG)*



He associates text with dullness, and perhaps that is part of the story: some kinds of online spaces can free students up to be stranger and more imaginative than their offline strategies permit. Teachers who explicitly support risk-taking in the online reflective environment see its value in the nature of the work that students produce:

*We make it quite explicit that the weblog is about their voice and about you know, and if they want to experiment with the weblog form then we really encourage that, and some students really do. ...there's one guy a couple of semesters ago who did it all in the form of dialogue, kind of, he used to make up little mini playlets in each posting. It was brilliant, it was really stimulating, so, a lot of the students take a really creative approach to the writing of the, of the blog and that we, we encourage that too. (Jane, teacher, PG)*

A critical and conscious appreciation of what webness can offer helps us to reframe reflection for a digital context that has positive gains, not just losses. It also presents challenges to assessment which are the same ones that teachers encounter at every turn in trying to use innovative online methods for writing. However, remixability, a lack of closure and the transformation of academic discourse are aspects of reflective practice in higher education that have always existed, and assessment of reflection should always have been addressing these challenges. In bringing together assessment and digitality, as high-stakes online reflection does, we have an opportunity to look towards truly innovative teaching, writing and assessment. The concluding chapter of this thesis imagines some digital futures for high-stakes reflection.

## Chapter 10: Conclusions

This concluding chapter has three goals: to state the contribution that this thesis has made to understandings of high-stakes online reflection in higher education; to point the way for future research in this area; and to imagine some plausible digital futures for these practices. Each of these will be taken in turn in the sections that follow.

### Stating the contribution

The story about high-stakes online reflection that I have been telling is that it is well worth the effort involved in breaking away from a humanist perspective that demands for it to be seen as honest, authentic, self-motivated and free. A humanist stance demands a denial of the very qualities of addressivity, power and webness that make high-stakes online reflection fascinating. Imagined otherwise, reflection reveals itself to be multifaceted, challenging and generative. Where problems such as surveillance, constraint and normativity are acknowledged, and strategies of resistance deployed, new spaces of shifting subjectivity, speed, risk and complexity can emerge.

I am not proposing that reflective practices should retreat to some pre-digital, pre-assessment state of perfect authenticity. As I argued in Chapter 6, reflection was never authentic; critical, ethical teaching demands that we address this if we are to compel students to produce reflective artefacts as part of our courses and programmes. It does not help when the governmentality and normativity of reflection is disguised with masks of authenticity and self-development: on the contrary, it makes things worse for students who are unable to figure out the rules of a game that is manifestly *not* the one they are told they are playing. Furthermore, the pretence deadens the practices of reflective writing that *could* emerge as aesthetically, ethically and intellectually rich.

I have argued that a demand for authenticity in reflection is hampering students' engagement with the audience-focused nature of high-stakes reflective writing, and the instability of subjectivity in digital environments. Strategic, performative,

experimental and explicitly digital engagements with reflection might be more generative and more rewarding for students, but achieving these will involve deliberate resistance to routines of institutional and professional surveillance, and to the discourse of authenticity that pervades reflective practice. Teachers will also have to acknowledge their own stake in reproducing practices of division, categorisation and regimentation through pedagogies of reflection, and their own positions of power in relation to assessment of reflection.

If teachers can take a critical stance in this way, there are new possibilities for online reflection. Giving students more experience of the 'blank page', emphasising compelling accounts rather than confessional narratives, and encouraging risky, fast and fragmented digital modes of reflective writing could open spaces for creativity and personal style to emerge.

Data from my interviews with teachers and students has shown that we require a different way forward for high-stakes online reflection. The present lack of criticality on the part of many students and teachers is unsustainable, and cracks are already showing in the stories that they are telling about their practices. Students are not doing what teachers think they are or should be doing, teachers are disappointing students by giving them less clarity and support than they require to negotiate the tricky practices of reflection, and both students and teachers are uncomfortable with aspects of the reflective practices they believe they are engaging in.

As with any research, there is always more that could be done. What I have presented here is neither exhaustive nor flawless. I have in a number of places pointed to areas in which more research could, and should, be done, and I will review these in the next section, and suggest some further ideas that have emerged during the course of this research.

## **Future research**

The analysis of interview data has produced a rich and varied set of issues, concerns and ideas that have been discussed in this thesis. Alternative modes of generating

data would, I think, be equally productive and would build on the arguments I have made here. For example, a discourse analysis approach to analysing online reflective artefacts would be extremely fruitful in teasing out further the implications of arguments concerning the effects of templates and ‘legitimate narratives’ (Chapter 7), and the addressivity of reflection (Chapter 4). As discussed in Chapter 3, two concerns prevented me from conducting such an analysis in this project. One was the issue of linking interview data with reflective artefact data, and the risk that students (even given pseudonyms) would be recognised by teachers and possibly others on their programmes who were familiar with their reflective writing. This could be addressed by undertaking a standalone analysis of reflective artefacts, perhaps drawing on interview data as well, but not conducting interviews with the students who participate in the artefact phase. There would then be no risk of exposing students to scrutiny from peers or teachers of what they might choose to discuss in an interview setting.

The other main issue that would need to be addressed in an analysis of online reflective artefacts is how to capture the webness of these artefacts. This would need to be planned carefully, with a view to storing a copy of a blog or e-portfolio in as close to its original online format as possible. This might be accomplished through the use of a web-page capture tool<sup>23</sup>. A combination of textual and visual analysis could then be undertaken based on both textual analysis (using Nvivo or similar) and analysis of screenshots, for example. Such an analysis of artefacts would sit extremely well alongside an interface analysis of the reflective environments in use, such as the one briefly sketched in the postscript in Chapter 7.

A further strand of visual research would be to do more work around asking students and teacher to create visual metaphors for their reflective practices. One of the most generative experiences of this research was the session I ran with a group of undergraduate students, where we discussed the concept of a metaphor and they produced visual-textual metaphors of their e-portfolios. Further image-elicitation

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<sup>23</sup> One option for capturing web pages is the ‘scrapbook’ plugin for the Firefox web browser: <https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/scrapbook/>, accessed 15/08/2011.

(Rose, 2007, p.240) of this kind could provide a larger set of visual data that could be analysed in a number of ways, including by following a discourse analysis approach that would explore the “rhetorical organization” (p.156) of images and their ways of constructing the meanings of reflection, disclosure, compulsion and surveillance.

As discussed in Chapter 8, there is also much that could be learned from an analysis that focussed in detail on disciplinary contexts. A project that set a number of disciplinary approaches to reflection and professional development side by side and explored them in detail would draw out further the issues of complexity, surveillance and normativity that were raised here. The postscript in Chapter 8 gestures towards the richness of exploring reflection in the disciplines.

Building on ideas of disciplinarity, another useful direction for future research could be to look at reflection and continuing professional development in professional practice. Moving out of the higher education context and into the realm of practice would, I think, expose some of the tensions that emerge when those who are expected to act as reflective practitioners are able to be more critical, and have different strategies for resistance, than students, on the whole, can be and have. I was offered a number of informal, personal or anecdotal accounts during the course of my research that would seem to suggest that such resistance is widespread and complex in its presentation. To explore this in detail would be of interest in its own right, but would also shed further light on the practices of students and teachers in professional education.

Finally, the new pedagogy for online reflection that is proposed in the next section of this chapter – with the key concepts of the spectacle and the placeholder underpinning it – could be explored, refined and tested in the context of a course design that explicitly set out to do ‘reflective practice’ differently. I would like to investigate this in my own teaching in the field of e-learning, and to work on educational development resources that could be used to put into practice the theoretical perspectives and ideas this research has generated.

## Digital futures for reflective practices

As a transitional object, the screen—like Alice’s looking glass—offers us passage through a liminal space in which our knowledge, our activities, and even ourselves are brought into conflict with the other. This transition and its concomitant transformation affect us directly, challenging the way we perceive and construct our world(s) and ourselves. In our own experience, for example, the seeming constants of language, identity, engagement and time were shown to be inconstant and made ‘unfamiliar’ through this transition or crossing. (Boon & Sinclair, 2010, p.54)

The moment of digital transition, as Boon and Sinclair describe it, is a moment of both discomfort and renewal. I believe we are in such a moment in terms of online reflection in higher education. This thesis has urged a move further into, rather than a retreat from, the unfamiliarity that online reflection brings, and I have pointed to some of the considerations we will need to attend to in making such a move.

What could a new way forward look like? What is a pedagogy for risky, creative, digital, fragmented reflection? In making proposals about a possible shape of digital futures for reflection, I am opening myself to the critiques of those who will see reflection differently. I think this is right: I have built a case for demolishing the foundations of reflective practice as it stands, and this has often meant taking a critical stance towards the current practices and theories of teachers and educational researchers. It is only fair to offer something in its place, and that is the purpose of this section. I recognise that these proposals are contestable, contingent and require testing and refinement, and that will be one of my tasks going forward.

Two concepts underpin my pedagogy for online reflection: the *spectacle*, and the *placeholder*. The spectacle acknowledges performance, audience, and surveillance, and suggests a playful and knowing orientation towards seeing and being seen. The placeholder gestures towards speed and partiality, and offers fragmentation, appropriation and creativity in the form of the remix.

Some of what is discussed below is inspired by my experiences in co-developing and teaching a course on the MSc in E-learning at the University of Edinburgh. This

course is called “E-learning and Digital Cultures” (EDC), and it makes use of strategies of visibility, openness, remix and fragmentation to encourage students to explore their own engagement with digital cultures, individually and as a group. Since its inception in 2009, the course has been completely open to the web, and students are assessed in part on the basis of a ‘lifestream’. The lifestream is an aggregated stream of content automatically pulled in from their activities across the web, including blogging and microblogging, social bookmarking, and collections of ‘liked’ and created content on a range of other web-based platforms. EDC is not mainly or explicitly about ‘reflection’, but it has features which can inform the more digital mode of self-representation that is needed to move online reflection forward. These features will be noted in what follows.

### **The spectacle**

In the social sciences, the spectacle has mostly been theorised, following Debord, as the ghastly antithesis of authenticity – as obsessed with the surface, the image and the act of looking (rather than being or encountering), which renders the world “hyperreal”, “self-referential” and “abstract” (Harris & Taylor, 2005, p.101). In a spectacular culture, “the meaning of images becomes less important than the fact that there is a steady supply of images to be viewed by ‘greedy eyes’” (*ibid*). Consumption and access are privileged over context and experience (p.102). Debord’s Marxist emphasis on oppression – which underpinned the Situationist movement he belonged to – makes his spectacle a one-way, tyrannical imposition.

Debord’s (1983) work on the “society of the spectacle” has contributed to shaping decades of critical responses to the ocularcentric, scopic regimes that characterise postmodern society. There is little to celebrate, it would seem, in a world made up entirely of superficiality, of passive spectators, and of commodification: “the current society of the spectacle is based on the stimulation of visual desire without true fulfillment” (Jay, 1988, p.311). However, much as I argued in the previous chapter in relation to ‘fast time’, there is in the current digital moment another conceptualisation of the spectacle which can offer an alternative: not authenticity, but participation and creation.

Mid- to late-20<sup>th</sup> century theories of the spectacle take little or no account of the *creation* of the spectacle, because they are so preoccupied with the effects of its consumption. As Dean (2010) has observed, this made sense at a time when most images were produced in a context of “broadcast media”, but offers no way to think about what she calls the “reflexive circuit” of social media and user-generated content:

Debord offers the notion of the “integrated spectacle” as the highest stage of the spectacular society. The integrated spectacle is an element of the world it depicts; it is part of the scene upon which it looks. It is a circuit. Debord misses the circuitry of the integrated spectacle because his account of the spectacle is embedded in a model of broadcast media. ...Debord’s worry stems from the fact that the images the spectator sees are “chosen by someone else”. (pp.108-9)

As Bayne (2008) points out, “the incursions of the digital add a mutable new dimension to decades of theorising of the visible and visual in culture” (p.395). Webness positions the spectacle within circulations of power and authorship, and needs alternative perspectives through which to theorise the spectacle for spaces where people create, appropriate *and* consume.

Digital visual culture offers a connection to theories of production and consumption found in art and film theory:

Theories of aesthetics and spectatorship developed within art theory and film study ...suggest possibilities for studying the kinds of interactivity and pleasures associated with the new media genres of digital visual culture that focus on surface play and spectacle. (Nixon, 2003, p.410)

In both film and art theory the apparent position of the spectator is neither absolute nor natural; it is variously shaped, contested, disguised and played with by filmmakers and artists. Mulvey’s (1975, online) key text on the pleasure of the gaze in the cinema describes the source of that pleasure as being taken in by the illusion crafted by the filmmaker:



What is seen of the screen is so manifestly shown. ...Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world.

Similarly, Fried (1980) observes the “paradox” of the neutralisation of the beholder’s presence in paintings and theatre:

In Diderot’s writings on painting and drama... the very condition of spectatordom, stands indicated as theatrical, a medium of dislocation and estrangement rather than of absorption, sympathy... [T]he success of both arts... are held to depend on whether or not painter and dramatist are able to undo that state of affairs, to *detheatricalize beholding* and so make it once again a mode of access to truth and conviction. (p.104)

Silverman (1992), following Lacan, understands these sorts of complex masking practices as hiding a breakdown of the “binarization” between spectacle and spectator (p.151). We are all held in “scopic relations” (*ibid*), and:

exhibitionism unsettles us because it threatens to expose the duplicity inherent in every subject, and every object – to reveal the subject’s dependence for definition upon the image/screen, and his/her capacity for being at the same time within the picture, and a representative for the Other of the gaze... We have at times assumed that dominant cinema’s scopic regime could be overturned by ‘giving’ women the gaze, rather than by exposing the impossibility of anyone ever owning that visual agency, or of him or herself escaping specularly. (p.152)

The visuality and theatricality of the spectacle comes from being crafted with spectators in mind, with a view to impressing them with performances and displays. However, students writing reflectively, and teachers reading their writing, are neither purely the spectacle nor the spectator. Where students display ‘themselves’ (as the exhibitionist does – knowingly and partially), they are both within the picture and the representative of the gaze. Teachers are equally subject to the gaze of the Other through their students’ attempts to write for them.

Student-writers are writing to be seen, to produce an image of themselves and to engage their audience. As teachers, we should help them produce digital spectacles

of reflection that acknowledge the audience(s) for their work, and craft the work explicitly towards those audiences. In Chapter 6, I quoted one teacher, Ian, as saying that reflective accounts needed to be “convincing” rather than “true”, and I suggested this as a possible way forward for breaking the link between visibility of writing and transparency of student ‘self’. However, to be a way forward, convincingness, or plausibility, in itself needs to be further theorised, and it is helpful to consider what a spectacle of conviction might entail.

In essence, conviction should be seen as an aesthetic rather than a narrative gesture. Narrative implies humanist concerns with coherence and consistency, where a more postmodern perspective values the loveliness of surfaces and simulacra. Spectacular reflective accounts need to be knowing about the craft and context of their production; and concern with aesthetic dimensions of reflection can have a broadening and contextualising effect:

The locus for reflection is then not ‘in’ the individual (decontextualised), but ‘in’ the total event, involving the embedding of act in a context that itself guides or moulds the act. Importantly, the reflective act can then be framed as a sensitivity – an aesthetic event rather than a functional or technical adjustment. (Bleakley, 1999, p.324)

In a subsequent article, Bleakley (2000) goes on to call for reflection to be reframed as “a reflexive dialogue with language’s registers and aesthetic possibilities, and with language’s deep structure as the discursive production of identities through social practices” (p.19). Lillis (2001) has made a similar point about student-writers’ need for an understanding of context, offering an “academic literacies/critical language awareness” frame for teaching students how to write (p.167). This frame emphasises language as “socially situated discourse practices”, moving away from other conceptions of academic language as transparent, individual, or unconsciously or mechanically absorbed (p.164). Many new sorts of questions emerge from such a critical and reflexive approach, including how to move away from practices of “monologic addressivity... where there is a denial of actual participants” (p.170). With her focus on essay-type literacies and texts, Lillis does not explore how texts

can be produced in other modes, but her frame is equally applicable to digital reflective practices.

The webness of online reflection offers new possibilities for aesthetic practices. It offers the screen as a surface where multimodality, hypertextuality and bricolage can be played out, and where dialogue can be foregrounded. It also shows how audience might be able to be wider than teachers may have previously assumed possible. Bringing students together in their online reflective spaces produces new kinds of discourse and addressivity:

The notion of audience for this reflective storytelling was shifting and I became aware that the group were not writing for me as tutor but were instead calling out to each other. At this point I had to learn to sit on my hands at my keyboard and allow the group blog to take on a life of its own. I felt both excited and bereft. Now that the shift of addressivity was established we began to explore the creative potential of storytelling in this online environment. The group shared metaphors, music, image and video as their reflective confidence grew. The digital/digitised stories were explored with reference to theories and lived experiences and rooted in the ongoing shared story of becoming a teacher. (Hughes & Purnell, 2008, p.149)

Opening reflective practices in this way can solve a number of problems about addressivity, by providing students with an unavoidable understanding of the visibility of what they are producing. This has been one of the best features of the EDC course: students engage energetically with one another in the space of their personal blogs, and the audience of peers makes itself felt through a vibrant culture of comments, Twitter messages (“tweets”) and cross-linkages. Occasionally others outside the course have become involved in conversations with students on Twitter or in the blogs as well, and student awareness that this can happen adds an extra dimension to the addressivity of their practices in the course spaces. Their *performance* of self-exploration is foregrounded, and the effect is a socially situated spectacle in which students “call out” (as Hughes and Purnell put it) to each other, and to a wider, unknown and unknowable audience who may be lurking beyond the footlights.

However, such openness must be accompanied by alternative approaches to ‘authenticity’, confession and disclosure. Convincingness in the spectacle is about mastery of form, not authenticity or revelation. The ability to craft spectacle within a given genre is a result of critically examining the genre, and reflective practice as it stands is very poor at subjecting itself (rather than the student self) to critical examination:

Secular humanism’s grip on the narrative mode may ...lead to superficial and sentimentalised confessional writing as reflective practice, where aesthetic is suffocated. (Bleakley, 2000, p.22)

The demonstration of competence, so essential to professional education in particular, might be undertaken differently than in the dominant personal-confessional mode. Alternative modes of reflection might encompass both the production and analysis of imagery, film and hypertextual accounts of professional practice. Fictional and idealised (Hargreaves, 2004) (or perhaps deliberately catastrophic) narratives of practice could be produced and then critiqued by deconstructing categories of “good” and “bad” practice (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, pp.67-8). Creative analytical practices (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p.962), such as deliberately constructing the same account from a number of perspectives (Bolton, 2005, pp.56-7), might take the place of more literal “dominant fictional forms” (Bleakley, 2000, p.19), while still giving teachers a way to interpret their students’ grasp of theoretical perspectives and practice issues.

Furthermore, through digital practices of tagging and aggregation, the production and gathering of fragments of observation, analysis and objects of interest can generate a culture of reflection as placeholder – the creation of a resource that students can return to, not as a narrative of the past or an artefact of development, but a space of continual bricolage in the present.

### **The placeholder**

In Chapter 9, the fleetingness of time and space for reflection was noted by a number of interviewees, and I suggested the metaphor of the placeholder (first mentioned by

Penny, a teacher I interviewed) as a way of understanding what fast, fragmented and immediate reflection might be like. Here I expand on this idea to explore the concept of digital placeholders in online reflection.

I propose the placeholder as a taggable, searchable, reconfigurable fragment of content. The opposite of a narrative or a “symphonic representation” (Cambridge, 2010), the placeholder stands alone as an expression of a thought, idea or moment. It has value in itself as an aesthetic object, and it can also be combined and recombined with other placeholders to create a spectacle of reflection. It is not intended to tell a story of development, personal growth or change. The bricolage or remix process itself may sometimes tell such a story, however, as students choose from amongst the content in their reflective environment to produce a particular effect.

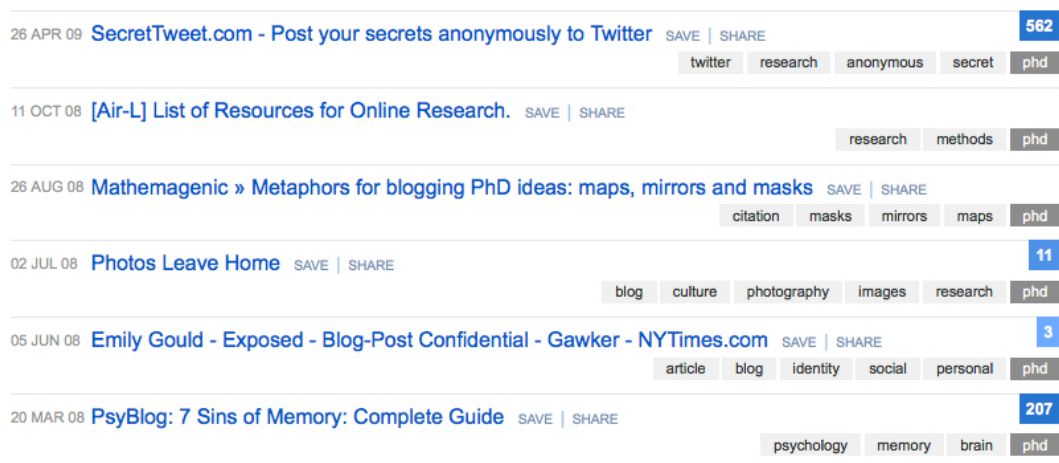
An important feature of a placeholder pedagogy is that placeholders should be created in spaces that are not highly structured, the way most e-portfolio environments are. A placeholder begins, always, with a blank page. This might mean that students choose to take photographs or create digital images, films, animations, wikis, blog posts or audio files. It does not suggest that these activities can be conducted in a ‘neutral’ space, because all interfaces have ideological implications (as we saw in Chapter 7). However, the ability to experiment with form, content and meaning-making in multimodal digital space, and to pull these new forms together in various ways, makes for a more exploratory, creative experience than filling in blanks on a pre-designed template can be. Modern blogging environments are increasingly becoming the sorts of flexible spaces where multimodal accounts can be produced and worked with in this way.

Placeholders can furthermore be worked with through tagging. To explore this it is useful to compare the concept of a bookmark (one sort of placeholder in a literal sense) in digital and analogue space. A bookmark in a print book can be in just one place at a time, and its function is to store one piece of information: “return to this”. It is a marker of past interest or a record of stoppage (“this is the place I’ve got to”). Many of us probably have books scattered around our homes or offices full of these

bookmarks – flags, notes, scraps of paper, receipts, paperclips, folded corners. Each one is individual, disconnected from the rest, and has to be sought out and deliberately returned to before further connections emerge from it.

Digital bookmarks are different. They are stored as hypertext, and augmented with metadata: descriptions, notes and most importantly, tags. Tags are keywords that describe the content of the link being bookmarked. This is a snapshot of a few of my digital bookmarks in the online social bookmarking service, Delicious.

### *Digital bookmarks as placeholders*



Each of the links above is accompanied by a set of keyword tags (in pale grey at the bottom right of each link).

A single tag is emblematic of brevity, surface and speed. It can represent the content it tags in only a superficial way. However, taken together, and turned into hyperlinks, tags become an evolving and complex “gathering” (Edwards, 2010) of subject and object. Ewing (2010, online) has described “hashtags” (the form of hyperlinked tags used on Twitter, for example) as “secret doors”, “time machines” and “collisions”. I can click on any of my own tags and be taken to all the other links I have given the same tag to. The result of that click is a remix of my links. The remix has not been deliberately created by me, but it reflects something of my interests over time that might be relevant or interesting to me now. It might spark new ideas or connections.

I can also, within the same system of tags, go beyond my own collection to see what others in the system have tagged using the same keyword. A collection of tags is sometimes called a “tag cloud”, and an example from the 2009 EDC course is given below (tags that have been more frequently used appear in a larger font):

*List of tags from across a course*

**Tags**  
**#ededc**  
 #mscdystopia artefact  
 assessment assignment Bayne  
 Bell communication  
 community Cybernetics  
 cyberspace **Cyborg**  
 digitalculture Digital Culture  
 digital ethnography dystopia  
 ELDC ethics  
**ethnography**  
 Ethnography mini project  
 Facebook film festival **Hand**  
**Haraway Hayles Hine**  
 Identity Kress learning  
**Lifestream**  
**posthuman** Readings  
**summary** technology  
 torchwood Transliteracy  
**Twitter** uncanny utopia  
 Virtual Ethnography visual  
 artefact visual artifact Web  
 2.0 week 6 weeklysummary 24

On the course web site, clicking any of the tags above leads to a page with all blog posts containing that tag, from all students on the course. These evolving folksonomies (user-generated taxonomies) can be markers of community and the social space of a course.

Tags are not really about completion or the past. Rather, they are agents of the present, insistently drawing the past out of itself and presenting it anew. They take us “from one place to another without traversing time”, and for Baudrillard (1994b) this is the true pleasure of speed:

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<sup>24</sup> Source: <http://digitalculture-ed.net/tags> , retrieved 31/7/2011.

What does speed itself mean to us if not the fact of going from one place to another without traversing time, from one moment to another without passing via duration and movement? Speed is marvellous: time alone is wearisome. (p.70)

A collapse of time, or what Bayne (2010) calls “the problematising of the ‘natural’ relation between past and present”, can contribute to an uncanny and posthumanist approach to learning which:

works with the idea of the learning process as volatile, disorienting and invigorating, and it also stretches conventional assessment frameworks to their limits. In defamiliarising the familiar through creative pedagogical appropriation of the digital, teaching becomes newly, and productively, strange. (p.10)

Here, as with the spectacle, access is privileged over context, which is another way of saying that context is continually represented, made part of the present moment. Each time I reuse a tag – knowingly or unknowingly – I am producing a link, a wormhole between my experiences and present and someone else’s (which might be a past self). The tag is in this sense the ultimate reflective practice, as it makes the past newly generative each time it is used.

Walker Rettberg (2008) has pointed out a paradox of personal weblogs: those that seem most confessional and intimate are often saturated with strategic fictionalisation, redaction and caution. Personal-confessional bloggers have to be careful about what they say, because their own identities, relationships and lives are being exposed to some degree, publicly. Anonymity is called for, but this can be very difficult to achieve and can require significant planning and thought. By contrast, those personal blogs which are gatherings of matters of interest (topical blogs, for example), but not confessional, can be intensely revealing of the shifting priorities, subjectivities and practices of their authors (p.121), without the problems of confession to contend with.

What we might gain from a more flexible approach to reflection that privileges aggregation over confession, is a rhizomatic (Cousin, 2005), smooth (Bayne, 2004b)



digital learning space. Asking students to tag the content they create or curate in a digital space is therefore a method by which to encourage a different mode of reflection: one that is instantly accessible through time and context, and available for reuse or remixing.

Practices that foreground reconfigurability and remixability are central to digital culture:

Two mutually constitutive features of digital culture: remediation as in the remix of old and new media, and bricolage in terms of the highly personalized, continuous, and more or less autonomous assembly, disassembly, and reassembly of mediated reality. (Deuze, 2006, p.66)

As dominant ‘vernacular’ forms, these practices are inevitably making their way into formal education (Carpenter, 2009), but are also contested there, as they are seen as coming into conflict with core academic values of textual supremacy, individual authorship and originality. At the same time, some teachers and educational researchers are arguing that the remix represents a fruitful lens through which to consider creativity:

Regardless of context – be it literary text or commonplace book or audio performance – [remix] is identified as a means of invention and a source of creativity. (Yancey, 2009, p.6)

It may also be central to pedagogical design:

From fixed and immutable, curriculum needs to be conceptualised as *content for meddling with*. And this means a significant shift in what many teachers prioritise in their teaching. While the written text remains important, the remixable curriculum demands that the contribution of other ‘non-text’ media – visuals, animation, sound – be elevated from their currently marginal status in an overwhelmingly text-dependent curriculum. (McWilliam, 2005, p.7)

As has been argued throughout this thesis, ‘experience’ is not a sacred category of knowledge that can never be questioned; it is constituted by and through its telling, and the context of its production. More creative and fragmented modes of

representation would emphasise the malleability of experience, and could give students new ways of understanding the academic and professional identities they are (re)producing – it could make experience into “content for meddling with”. Remix shakes things up, and offers new perspectives, and it is here that its value for reflective practices may be most apparent:

Representing material in a kaleidoscope fashion ...affords ambiguity in a positive sense. Fracture and vignette allow sorting and resorting (or remixing). They can help resist ordinality, a given hierarchy of things. Thus, they avoid teleology (looking at the end of the story). (Bowker & Star, 2007, p.279)

Remix challenges our categories of “coherence” and “consistency”, and shows us that “consistency or coherence can only be achieved in theory and not in practice. Or consistency depends on non-coherence” (Law, 2004, p.92). Using the example of the cinematic flashback, Jarrett (2004) draws attention to the “temporal montage” that blogging makes possible, and argues that the blogger’s subjectivity is “unfixed” by its continual assemblage and re-assemblage:

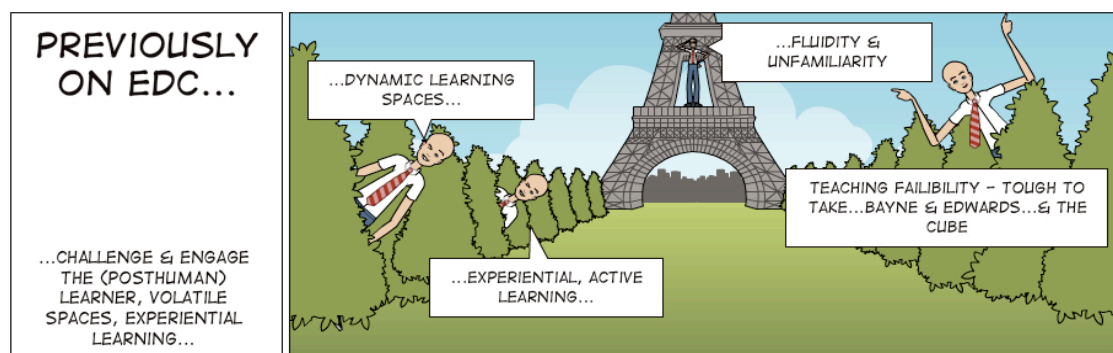
The assembled subjectivity of the blogger is never fixed, but always becoming. The dynamic nature of the content of a blog and thus of the selective representation of Self effected by the blogger renders it an unfixed subjectivity. De-centred and re-centred by each new entry, the subject who is represented by a blog is the epitome of the postmodern identity Poster sees reflected in the database. (online)

Burgess (2007) calls remix “the more spectacular end of the DIY media continuum” (p.8), and in large part this is because, like any good spectacle, its focus of production is on an eventual audience. The success of a remix depends heavily on the presence of a discourse community that can interpret it (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008, p.28), and so a focus on remix in reflection will need a more social context than has traditionally been provided for reflective practices.

In the EDC course, the lifestream is an example of a placeholder pedagogy. Though content in the lifestream appears in chronological order, the combination of sources that ‘feed’ into it create a fragmented spectacle rather than a coherent narrative. Each

week, students review this spectacle and draw their own connections and conclusions about what the content from the week has ‘revealed’ to them about their learning. This practice, repeated for 12 weeks, merges into the stream, as the weekly reviews are incorporated into the lifestream itself. The end result is a posthumanist “gathering” (Edwards, 2010), a machinic remix of the various online actions of each student, punctuated by sense-making exercises which – often playfully – attempt to impose order on the fragments of the week. Here is an excerpt from one such ordering exercise:

### *Making sense of fragments*



(Gibb, 2010, online)

This student, working within the constraints of an online cartoon generator (Pixton), produced weekly comics summarising the key issues that emerged that week in his lifestream. This comic’s meaning emerges from both its text and its imagery (for example, the replicated self, the juxtaposing of natural and built environment). It is both personal and spectacular – designed for an audience of his peers and teachers, part of a discourse community that will recognise the references he makes.

Another student on the same course explained at the end of the course why the lifestream was not of the past:

Comments I made, notes to myself at the beginning, are far enough from me now in time that I can look and be inspired anew, or reminded of things I thought I would do and have forgotten – or haven’t started yet. This isn’t the past, it’s a guide for the future, for me anyway. (Boyd, 2010, online)

Marvellous digital speed and fragmentation brings the past into the present, where it can be taken up and made anew.

## In closing

In our interview, Floyd mentioned that he felt there were many complicated aspects of reflection that he would want to understand better before he would be prepared to do what his teachers had done, and summatively assess reflective writing. I asked him to say more about this, and he replied:

*Floyd (student, PG): I think it must tough for an assessor to do, because how, how, what kind of, uh, assumptions are they making about the reflection ...I mean, how do you train somebody to write reflectively, and then how do you train somebody to mark reflection? They, I would hope that they've got a pretty deep understanding of reflection and then, on top of that, have, eh, understanding of some of the issues that [pause] that uh can impact on reflection...*

*Jen: And do you have the impression that the [teacher], who was marking your work for this course, did have that kind of deep understanding of how to assess reflection?*

*Floyd: I assume so... They're teaching the course and they're asking for me to do it and, I guess, I'm just making an assumption that they know what they're doing. Or they bloody well ought not be doing it! [laughter]*

I agree with Floyd that responsibility for ensuring that reflective practices are ethically and pedagogically sound lies with teachers, in their more-powerful position as professional and academic gatekeepers, and in their role as assessors and primary audiences for student reflective writing. However, the confidence that Floyd wants his teachers to have would be badly misplaced where humanist understandings of reflection are left unchallenged.

As teachers in higher education we are bound up in and constituted by professional discourses and institutional demands just as our students are, and our own approaches to reflection are neither autonomous nor easily dismantled and reconstructed. Nevertheless, high-stakes online reflection needs to be rethought, and we need to start by adopting more critical and creative approaches to subjectivity, addressivity and webness in reflective writing. These approaches need to be helped

along and underpinned by research that demonstrates what the problems are, and what possible alternatives might look like. This research has tried to create some openings through which to see reflection differently.

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# Appendix A: Research interview schedules

## Questions for students

### about you

- How did you come to be studying on this course?
- Have you had other experiences of writing reflectively? What?

### reflection on your course

- Was reflection an important part of your course?
- What is reflective writing for on this course?
- How much did you write reflectively in your portfolio/blog? How often? What motivated you to write?
- Did your tutor read your writing? Comment on it? How did it work?
- [if relevant] Peer feedback – what was this like? What kind of comments did you get?
- Did you get as much feedback as you expected? Was it the right amount?
- Are there issues around trust and the student-tutor relationship that are different in this way of working?
- While you were writing, how aware were you of the assessment criteria or of being assessed?

### reflection and you

- What did you get out of doing reflective writing? Do you enjoy it?
- Are there any problems for you with the notion of reflective writing?
- Have your feelings about writing your portfolio/blog changed since you started? How?
- Who is your audience for this portfolio/blog? How do you hope they will see you?
- Can you write personal things in your portfolio/blog? Have you? What happened/ would happen if you did?
- What kinds of things would you not write in your portfolio/blog?



### **working online**

- How is it to do this writing online?
- Who owns your portfolio/blog? Why?
- Have you edited the portfolio/blog at all? Would you?
- What do you think is going to happen to your portfolio/blog after this course? After you graduate? Will you continue on with your portfolio/blog? What will you use it for?
- What kind of identity did you construct (or reveal) in your portfolio/blog?
- Do you have other online identities besides this one? What is the relationship between your identity in this portfolio/blog and your other online identities?
- Have you shared your portfolio/blog with other people besides your tutor/peer feedback group? Why? What has happened?

[ask them to draw or describe a metaphor for their portfolio/blog]

## **Questions for teachers**

### **about you**

- Can you tell me something about your involvement with this course? (how long teaching, own background)
- Do you do reflection yourself in any context? What do you do?
- What do you personally think reflection is for?

### **reflection on your course**

- Can you describe how reflection is incorporated into your course? How is it assessed? What does it count for?
- What led to reflection being done in this way?
- Is reflection an important part of your course?
- Are your practices conventional in this area of study?
- How are students on your course supported to be reflective?
- How do you understand your own role in terms of supporting or guiding reflection?

- Are there any problems for you with the notion of reflective writing?
- Are there any awkward power issues involved for you in this way of teaching?

### **student reflection**

- How 'real' or 'authentic' does your students' reflection seem to you?
- What kind of identities do you think students negotiate or manage when writing in this way?
- Do students ever address you in their reflective writing (implicitly or explicitly)? What do you make of that? How do you respond?
- Do you think of yourself as an audience for your students? What kind of audience are you?
- Do you think your students enjoy doing reflection? (who does/doesn't? why?)
- Do you enjoy reading your students' reflection? Why (not)?
- Has a student ever shared information in their reflections that you felt was too personal? How have you responded to this?
- What makes a good reflection? A bad one?

### **working online**

- Who owns the reflective spaces students use? Why?
- What happens to the students' reflection after the course? After the students graduate?
- How would you describe what students are doing when they reflect? (Are students being themselves? Constructing an identity? Performing?) What metaphor would you use to describe this?

Anything else?



## Appendix B: Information and consent form for research participants

### Form for students

*Research project: Online reflective practices and performances in higher education*

#### Participant Information and Consent Form for Students

As part of my PhD research in the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh, I am talking to lecturers and students in the UK whose courses or programmes involve ‘high-stakes reflection’ online. This means reflective blogs or e-portfolios which are assessed and count towards your grade, or which are used as evidence for progression or membership in a profession or professional body. I am hoping to learn about how students and lecturers negotiate issues of identity, authenticity, ownership, privacy and performativity in high-stakes online reflection.

I am very grateful that you have agreed to be interviewed, and to share some of your reflective writing with me. The interview questions themselves will be very open-ended. I am interested in hearing about your thoughts about and experiences with reflective writing, working online, and your expectations and ideas about authenticity, authorship and identity in online reflection. The information you share with me will help me to understand more about how reflective identities are constructed and performed, and will help inform the future direction of my research.

I will be extremely careful to make sure that no identifying information is used in any reports or publications arising from my research. In particular, as your lecturer could potentially recognise an extract from your reflective writing, I will be cautious about how I use this material. I will also be mindful of my publication timeline to ensure that your course is completed before publishing anything potentially recognisable to your lecturer.

The following questions aim to ensure that you are aware of my role and the kinds of uses I will and won’t make of the information you share with me today or in the future. **If you have any queries at all, please get in touch with me, Jen Ross, at [jen.ross@ed.ac.uk](mailto:jen.ross@ed.ac.uk)**

Please tick the boxes beside the statements you agree with, and sign and date the bottom of the page. I will leave you with your own copy of this information and consent form.

☐ I understand that I am being interviewed as part of Jen Ross's PhD research project at the University of Edinburgh.

☐ I understand the purpose of this research, and that I am able to ask questions about it at any time.

☐ I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent for involvement at any time.

☐ I am willing for this interview to be digitally recorded and transcribed for use as part of the research.

☐ I am willing for illustrative examples or extracts from any written material I share with Jen to be used as part of the research.

☐ I am willing for anonymised extracts from this interview to be used as part of the research.

☐ I am willing to be contacted about participating in further interviews for this project.

☐ I understand that the data Jen collects will - though fully anonymised - appear in publications relevant to this area of research.

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Form for teachers

*Research project: Online reflective practices and performances in higher education*

### Participant Information and Consent Form for Lecturers

As part of my PhD research in the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh, I am talking to Higher Education lecturers and students in the UK whose courses or programmes involve ‘high-stakes reflection’ online. This means reflective blogs or e-portfolios which are summatively assessed, or which are used as evidence for progression or membership in a profession or professional body. I am hoping to learn about how students and lecturers negotiate issues of identity, authenticity, ownership, privacy and performativity in high-stakes online reflection.

I am very grateful that you have agreed to be interviewed. The interview questions themselves will be very open-ended. I am interested in hearing about your thoughts about and experiences with facilitating and assessing reflection, working online with students, and your expectations and ideas about authenticity, authorship and identity in online reflection. The information you share with me will help me to understand more about how reflective identities are constructed and performed, and will help inform the future direction of my research.

I hope that you may find the results of my study useful in developing resources to support online reflective practice, and I will send you a brief report of my findings. In addition, if you wish to be kept informed of publications or other related materials, please tick this box. ☐ (Please note that I will keep your contact details on file, but will use them only in relation to this research project, to send you the information you request or to communicate with you about your participation.)

The following questions aim to ensure that you are aware of my role and the kinds of uses I will and won’t make of the information you share with me today or in the future. **If you have any queries at all, please get in touch with me, Jen Ross, at [jen.ross@ed.ac.uk](mailto:jen.ross@ed.ac.uk)**

Please tick the boxes beside the statements you agree with, and sign and date the bottom of the page. I will leave you with your own copy of this information and consent form.

☐ I understand that I am being interviewed as part of Jen Ross’s PhD research project at the University of Edinburgh.

☐ I understand the purpose of this research, and that I am able to ask questions about it at any time.

☐ I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent for involvement at any time.

☐ I am willing for this interview to be digitally recorded and transcribed for use as part of the research.

☐ I am willing for illustrative examples or extracts from any written material I share with Jen to be used as part of the research.

☐ I am willing for anonymised extracts from this interview to be used as part of the research.

☐ I am willing to be contacted about participating in further interviews for this project.

☐ I understand that the data Jen collects will - though fully anonymised - appear in publications relevant to this area of research.

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Snapshots of coding using tree nodes

### Snapshot 1: July 2009

This snapshot shows the first page of tree node headings from the category “lecturers”. The nodes have not yet been organised into broad themes, and are largely descriptive. There is one example of nesting, where the node “staff time” sits within “implications for teaching”, but the rest are single nodes with no parents or children.

Type	Name	Memo Link	Sources
Tree Node	lecturers		0
	<b>Type</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Memo Link</b>
	Tree Node	amount of direction	
	Tree Node	approaches to assessment	
	Tree Node	approaches to reflection	
	Tree Node	assessment	
	Tree Node	audience	
	Tree Node	authenticity	
	Tree Node	being online	
	Tree Node	benefits of eportfolio	
	Tree Node	boring and interesting	
	Tree Node	choice and coercion	
	Tree Node	commenting	
	Tree Node	confession	
	Tree Node	confidentiality	
	Tree Node	cultural issues	
	Tree Node	development	
	Tree Node	editing	
	Tree Node	effect of assessment	
	Tree Node	emotion	
	Tree Node	empowering	
	Tree Node	ensuring standards	
	Tree Node	eportfolio enables reflection	
	Tree Node	excitement	
	Tree Node	experience of reflection	
	Tree Node	experimentation	
	Tree Node	false reflection	
	Tree Node	feedback strategies	
	Tree Node	feelings about blogging	
	Tree Node	flexibility	
	Tree Node	getting personal	
	Tree Node	good reflection	
	Tree Node	implications for teaching	
		<b>Type</b>	<b>Name</b>
		Tree Node	staff time
	Tree Node	IMPORTANT	
	Tree Node	improvement from paper	
	Tree Node	info literacies	
	Tree Node	interactions	
	Tree Node	intro to eportfolio	
	Tree Node	knowing students	



## Snapshot 2: February 2010

The first page of tree nodes, still separated into categories of ‘lecturers’ and ‘students’. This page shows the start of the lecturers category, which now has nested nodes within the broader themes of “contexts of reflection”, “discipline” and “disguise”.

lecturers		0	0
Type	Name	Memo Link	Sources
	Contexts of reflection		0
	Type	Name	Memo Link
		approaches to reflection	
		disaggregating reflection	
		excitement	
		how it works in context	
		impact of work	
		models of reflection	
		phases of eport development	
		time and workload	
		unconventional practice	
		why using reflection	
	Discipline		0
	Type	Name	Memo Link
		academic writing	
		computer types	
		disciplinary context	
		disciplinary meaning of reflection	
		exemplar	
		in practice on placement	
		institutional constraints	
		institutional factors	
		motivation	
		muscle memory	
		natural vs disciplinary	
		policy factors	
		practice vs theory	
		professional context	
		professional tech context	
		reflection as genre	
		science types	
		structure and template	
		writing skill	
	Disguise		0
	Type	Name	Memo Link
		admin benefits	
		authenticity	
		Type	Name
			editing
		choice and coercion	
		compulsory reflection	
		connection	
		empowering	
		external drivers	
		knowing students	
		power	
		surveillance	
		tensions and power issues	
		tensions with reflection	
		tutor engagement	

## **Proposed structure, generated in Spring 2010 based on theoretical work and coding**

### **Performance**

- ‘good’ and ‘bad’ reflection, narratives of reflection
- awareness of assessment
- competitiveness and academic vs reflective identities (esp re peer sharing)
- design and visibility? (portfolios)
- writing for an audience

### **Trace**

- archives and compulsory memory
- privacy
- (ownership?)
- being public
- blogging and literacies

### **Disguise**

- hidden power relations
- surveillance
- instrumentalism?
- authenticity and the ‘true self’ – identities vs layers

### **Protection**

- revealing and confessing, self revelation
- strategies of resistance or caution (box ticking, playing the game, silences and gaps, superficiality)
- (ownership?)

### **Transformation**

- changing practice and professions
- personal and professional development and progress
- subjectivity and voice
- time?

### **Discipline**

- self-discipline, habit
- talking the walk
- array of meanings of reflection
- developing professional/disciplinary ways of writing and thinking

## Snapshot 3: June 2011

The first page of the final version of the tree node coding, from which nodes were exported into Word files and extracts were selected for use in data chapters. Teacher and student data is combined here, and nodes have been renamed to reflect points of particular interest.

Tree Node	Discipline All	
	<b>Type</b>	<b>Name</b>
	Tree Node	academic discourse
	Tree Node	breaking into stages
	Tree Node	changing profession
	Tree Node	computer types
	Tree Node	developing boundaries
	Tree Node	disciplines
	Tree Node	ensuring standards
	Tree Node	flexibility
	Tree Node	future reflection
	Tree Node	habit
	Tree Node	high stakes professional
	Tree Node	how professionals practice
	Tree Node	in practice on placement
	Tree Node	institutional factors
	Tree Node	laziness
	Tree Node	learning to love the eportfolio
	Tree Node	managing emotions
	Tree Node	mental models of reflection
	Tree Node	mentoring
	Tree Node	pride
	Tree Node	professionalism
	Tree Node	reflection as genre
	Tree Node	role of reflection on course
	Tree Node	self assessment
	Tree Node	self knowledge
	Tree Node	self motivation
	Tree Node	structuring reflection
	Tree Node	student reaction to reflection
	Tree Node	supporting reflection
	Tree Node	talking the talk
	Tree Node	work focus
Tree Node	Disguise all	
	<b>Type</b>	<b>Name</b>
	Tree Node	authenticity
	Tree Node	choice and empowerment
	Tree Node	confession
	Tree Node	disguising difference
	Tree Node	external drivers
	Tree Node	hiding the work
	Tree Node	honesty
	Tree Node	institutional context
	Tree Node	knowing students

## Appendix D: Publications and presentations relating to this thesis

### Peer-reviewed publications

Ross, J. (2012). Just what is being reflected in online reflection?: new literacies for new media practices. in L Dirckinck-Holmfeld, V Hodgson, D McConnell (eds), *Exploring the Theory, Pedagogy and Practice of Networked Learning*. New York: Springer.

Ross, J. (2011). Traces of self: online reflective practices and performances in higher education *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16/1.

Ross, J. (2010). Was that Infinity or Affinity? Applying Insights from Translation Studies to Qualitative Research Transcription. Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 11/2. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1357>

### Conference presentations and invited talks

- “[Just what is being reflected in online reflection?: new literacies for new media practices](#)“. Networked Learning, 3-4 May 2010, Aalborg, Denmark.
- “Reflective practices as masks: thinking about online reflection in higher education”. Invited talk, [University of Glasgow Learning and Teaching Centre seminar series](#), 13 January 2010, Glasgow.
- “Reflective practices as masks: a new way to think about reflection in higher education”. [Society for Research into Higher Education conference](#), 8-10 December 2009, Newport.
- “Personal, professional and academic voices in online reflection: new literacies for new media practices”. Invited talk in the research students session of the ESRC-funded Literacy in the Digital University seminar: [The relation of new media practices to traditional literacy practices in the academy and the professions](#). University of Edinburgh, 16 October 2009.
- “Was that infinity or affinity?: qualitative research transcription as translation”. Invited seminar at the [Translations, Adaptations and Modalities seminar series](#), Institute of Advanced Studies in Humanities, University of Edinburgh. 10 February 2009, Edinburgh.

- “Traces of self: online reflective practices and performances in higher education”.  
[Association for Internet Researchers conference](#), 16-18 October 2008, IT University of  
Copenhagen, Copenhagen.

## **Published Work**

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## **Just what is being reflected in online reflection?: new literacies for new media learning practices**

**Jen Ross**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter makes the case that new literacies are required when reflective practices in higher education move online. Online reflective writing is profoundly influenced by wider cultural understandings of blogging and personal disclosure and risk online. We can see in current blogging practices a convergence of the rise of the concept of personal branding (Peters 1997, Lair et al 2005), and what Scott describes as the “cultural tendency to seek out confessional narratives of self-disclosure” (2004, 92). This convergence exposes a number of tensions: between self-promotion and authenticity, between accusations of narcissism and pressures to confess, and between moral panics around privacy and safety and a growing sense that online invisibility equates to personal and professional negligence, and that the more presence the better. As students negotiate the management of personal, academic and sometimes also professional voices in blogs and reflective e-portfolios, they bring in to play writing approaches which are new not in their substance but in their modality. This chapter proposes a set of (often conflicting) norms and expectations widely associated with blogging. These cluster around themes of authenticity, risk, pretence, othering, narcissism and commodification. It explores how these are reflected in the assumptions and practices of students and teachers, and goes on to argue for greater attention to be given to the nature of *online* reflective writing, and a more explicit and critical engagement with the tensions it embodies.

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I argue that new literacies are required when reflective practices in higher education move online. Online reflective writing in education, whether publicly visible, limited to small groups of learners, or restricted to just a student and their teacher, is profoundly influenced by wider cultural understandings of blogging and personal disclosure and risk online. Addressing this demands under-

standing spaces for formal online reflection (primarily weblogs and e-portfolios at the time of writing) as a new site of practice which takes its meaning from a specific and complex set of social and technical relations (Goodfellow and Lea, 2007).

Reflective writing and practices are an important element of teaching and learning (and, increasingly, assessment) in many disciplines, particularly those with a professional or vocational focus. Reflection in education is generally grounded in a humanist discourse of a 'true' or 'central' self which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing about thoughts and experiences. This discourse underpins the various projects of reflective writing in higher education as described by (for example) Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985), Brockbank and McGill (1998) and Moon (1999). However, it is problematic for two main reasons: it masks the increasingly invasive character of educational practices which demand confession and self-surveillance as evidence of progress and learning, and it assumes a knowable, malleable yet autonomous self at its centre. These problems are greatly exacerbated by the increasingly common use of online environments for reflection.

Despite this, the literature dealing with educational blogs and e-portfolios mostly uncritically accepts these tools and practices as beneficial above and beyond offline practices, in terms of efficiency, accessibility, relevance, the enhancement of technical skills, and in terms of the ease of finding an audience and fostering community and dialogue. Where drawbacks are identified, these are usually attributed to lack of motivation, understanding or technical proficiency on the part of students or teachers, lack of institutional understanding or support, concerns about privacy and safety in the online environment, or sometimes a lack of time or resource to properly implement these otherwise promising technologies.

There is also very little in the way of engagement with the online subject in this literature. Online reflective accounts are assumed to have a straightforward relationship with the offline selves of students, and few authors writing about online reflection ask what it means to create digital-textual selves or what impact reflecting online has on the subjectivity of students and teachers. Where digital difference is acknowledged in online reflective practices, it is seen to be technological rather than conceptual, and beneficial rather than problematic (Butler, 2006, p.12).

In this chapter, I challenge this technicist perspective. I argue that online reflective practices are conceptually different from their offline counterparts, by showing one way that they are affected by their digitality: by their association with blogging as a cultural phenomenon.

Blogging is a genre which privileges individual voice, addressivity, and a blurred distinction between public and private spheres (Walker Rettberg 2008). We can see in current blogging practices a convergence of the rise of the concept of personal branding (Peters 1997, Lair et al 2005), and what Scott describes as the "cultural tendency to seek out confessional narratives of self-disclosure" (2004, p.92). This convergence exposes a number of tensions: between self-promotion and authenticity, between accusations of narcissism and pressures to confess, and between moral panics around privacy and safety and a growing sense that online invisibility equates to personal and professional negligence, and that the more presence the better. As students negotiate the management of personal, academic and sometimes also professional voices in blogs and reflective e-portfolios, they must bring in to play literacies which are new not in their substance but in their modality. Literacies are socially situated and multiple practices

(Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič 2000; Lillis 2003; Lea and Street 2009), and writing both reflects and constructs identities (Ivanič 1998). The context of writing reflectively *online* is different from other forms of reflective writing, with different sorts of implications for the identities and practices of the student-writers.

In what follows I propose a set of (often conflicting) norms and expectations widely associated with blogging. These cluster around themes of authenticity, risk, pretence, othering, narcissism and commodification. I explore how these are reflected in the assumptions and practices of students and teachers, and go on to argue for greater attention to be given to the nature of *online* reflective writing, and a more explicit and critical engagement with the tensions it embodies.

## **This chapter in the context of networked learning**

This chapter defines “networked learning” in two senses. First: as learning that involves students being purposefully digitally connected with other people and with electronic resources. In 2002, the E-quality for E-learning manifesto declared that in “quality” networked e-learning, “connectivity and process is as valuable as the substance and focus of the connection” (E-quality Network, 2002). The manifesto proposes a balance between content and conversation, and attempts to redress what the authors saw as a harmful fixation on information, at the cost of connection. The manifesto was prescient in its insistence on this: a trend towards connectivity is apparent in the rise of web 2.0, in subsequent writing about e-learning, and in more recent popular writing about the web. Goodyear et al, for example, warn that “use of online *materials* is not a *sufficient* characteristic to define networked learning” (2004, p.2), and Doctorow has provocatively reversed the maxim that “content is king”, claiming that: “conversation is king. Content is just something to talk about” (2006). Online reflective practices in higher education are complex in their connectivity – they can cover the continuum from private to public, from intensely networked to one-to-one. Nevertheless, the foundational notion is one of personal engagement in a digital environment for the gaze of another or others (see McKenna’s 2005 work on addressivity for an exploration of the effects of writing for a ‘superaddressee’ or unknowable potential audiences in digital environments) and the concept of networked learning in this sense most certainly applies to online reflection.

The second notion of “networked learning” I am working with here is of learning that is immersed in networks and digital flows of information and culture. In emphasising the value of the network, quality e-learning is proposed by the manifesto as social, communicative and, by extension, cultural. However, the culture in which all learning, but especially e-learning, is immersed extends beyond the walls of the institution, as Carpenter contends: “[electronic] environments allow for and even encourage active integration and dynamic interaction, resulting in a mixing of genres and literacy practices that does not respect conventional categories, divisions, or dichotomies, including the border that separates... the popular from the academic” (2009, p.144). Jones and Dirckinck-Holmfeld (2009) make a similar claim, that computer networks have a tendency to “disrupt and disturb traditional boundaries in education” (p.13), including the boundaries of public and private which are of great relevance here. I would argue that this is due not primarily to the homogenising power of digital interfaces, as Carpenter claims, or to



the extent to which tools “fundamentally mediate both higher mental functioning and human action”, as Jones and Dirckinck-Holmfeld (ibid) put it. Instead, as Castells has argued, organisations (including educational institutions) may trigger, but ultimately cannot control, flows of information and communication in digital space:

A structural logic dominated by largely uncontrollable flows within and between networks creates the conditions for the unpredictability of the consequences of human action through the reflection of such action in an unseen, uncharted space of flows. (Castells 1999, p.59).

Online reflection is highly attuned to its cultural context – sometimes deliberately, as for example with pedagogical designs which aim to ‘harness’ what Duffy and Bruns call “a growing impetus towards personal expression and reflection, and also the sharing of personal ‘spaces’” (2006, p.34). However, even when not intentional, online reflection is perceived by students and teachers in my research as part of a wider cultural move towards digital disclosure. The issues of privacy, authenticity and risk that attend blogging, social networking and the social and digital practices of popular culture are also to be found in the educational practices which reflect them. Students react to this momentum towards disclosure with varying degrees of alarm, resistance and performativity – and in ways which can be significantly at odds with the stated aims of the reflective practices they are engaged in. Rehabilitating online reflection requires attention to be paid to the appropriateness of those aims in a digital context, and to the literacy requirements of practices which are multivocal, personal, and “drenched in social factors” (Holquist 2002, p.61).

## **Research context**

This chapter emerges from my research exploring how students and teachers negotiate issues of identity, authenticity, ownership, privacy and performativity in high-stakes online reflection in higher education. By high-stakes, I mean reflection which is summatively assessed or has a direct impact on access to a profession or professional body. The chapter draws on data from 31 semi-structured interviews with students and lecturers from across 8 university programmes in the United Kingdom which have a high-stakes reflective component. The programmes span face-to-face, online, undergraduate and postgraduate contexts, and subject areas including education, social work, built environment, health, and law. Four of the universities involved in my study are based in England, and the other four in Scotland. I spoke with 14 female and 6 male students, and 9 female and 3 male teachers. The cultural backgrounds of participants was mainly English or Scottish, but I also interviewed students from Germany, Italy, Australia, Canada, and the Ukraine. The interview extracts cited in this chapter have been anonymised and pseudonyms used in place of real names.

Participating teachers defined themselves as doing high-stakes online reflection on programmes or courses. I worked with constellations of students, teachers and reflective artefacts, to situate the data in specific contexts of practice. Participants took part in one interview, and were also asked for documentary data – relevant documentation about their high-stakes reflective practices in the case of teachers, and access to their reflective artefacts in the case of students.

Interview transcripts were produced by me in some cases and by an external transcriber in others, reviewed in detail, and coded according to emerging themes from the interviews and the parallel theoretical work being done to analyse reflective practices as masks (Ross 2011). The data that is presented in this chapter is drawn from work around a broader theme of the ‘trace’ – focusing on the cultural practices which make their way into academic practices (as discussed here), but also on the concepts of ownership, subjectivity and the archive.

Having described the context in which this data was generated, I now move on to describe six ‘stories’ associated with blogging, and show how these are reflected in the assumptions and practices of teachers and students. The chapter concludes by proposing engaging more creatively and critically with the digital, and with matters of subjectivity and authenticity, in online reflective practices.

## **Six stories of blogging**

In the past decade, blogging has become emblematic of the social or read-write web, and its influence has been felt in social, political, cultural and professional spheres (Bruns & Jacobs 2007). Before Facebook and Twitter emerged to attract the indignation of commentators dismayed by the narcissism, pointlessness and disregard for privacy that apparently characterises social media, blogging was the prime target of such speculations (Nardi et al 2004). At the same time, bloggers themselves, along with some social media and business scholars position blogging practice as one of authentic self-development, personal branding, or both (Reed 2005, Dutta 2010). These discourses are now part of the digital cultural landscape, and both students and teachers in my research are influenced by them when they come to engage in online reflection.

Lillis describes the writing ‘voices’ of students as being informed by their multiple identities and experiences. So, the meanings that students attribute to the writing practices of online reflection are influenced the social and cultural context they are in. She goes on to point out that student writing is also shaped “by the voices they are attempting to respond to” (2001, p.46). Where teachers have their own tacit understandings of being online, students must feel their way through a minefield of overlapping, conflicting discourses in order to arrive at a mode of writing which meets the explicit criteria, but also the implicit expectations that are being shaped by a broader digital cultural context.

Poster calls the online domain a “new speech situation” (2006, p.156). He frames this in terms of subjectivity, but it can also be framed as a literacies issue – it is a new “system of authoring, owning and appropriating texts” (Goodfellow and Lea 2007, p.52). Despite the academic setting of online reflection, and regardless of the specific tools being used (institutional or commercial weblogs, e-portfolios, or virtual learning environments), the structures employed are those of the blog as cultural product, and teachers and students “read and construe meaning from cultural products in complex, nuanced ways” (Carpenter, 2009, p.139). These six stories of blogging are an attempt at capturing different facets of this broader context and aligning them with what teachers and students say about their online reflective practices. In doing so, the stories tease out the conflicts and tensions which need to be addressed in developing and deploying these practices.

### **Authenticity: blogs should be authentic and honest**

Reflective educational practices have always demanded confession and certain kinds of stories about the self (Hargreaves 2004, Devas 2004, Macfarlane & Gourlay 2009, Ross 2011). Online reflective practices, like their offline counterparts, often continue to be framed in terms of authenticity, integrity, purposefulness, and autonomous selfhood (Barrett and Carney 2005, Stefani, Mason and Pegler 2007). However, to move online is to tap in to new modes of representing the self in what can feel like an especially public or surveilled space. Authenticity is surfaced in online practices, for students and teachers, more explicitly than in an offline mode. This is echoed in the blogging literature.

Bloggers outside educational contexts often appear to see their practice as not only necessarily authentic, but visibly so, and reflective of a knowable self (Holbrook 2006). As Reed comments, “[bloggers] treat weblogs as straightforward indexes of self; they commonly assert that ‘my blog is me’” (2005, p.227). The perception is that audiences expect and assess the authenticity of a blogger’s voice: “aware of the constant possibility that a fictional text may be posing as non-fiction, readers online have been exhaustive in investigating suspicious texts” (Freidrich 2007, p.62-3).

Students in my research were insistent that they are both honest and authentic in their online writing. For some, this is described as natural or intrinsic. Megan acknowledged a degree of formality that may be associated with the assessed nature of the writing she does in her online reflection, but insists on a ‘voice’ that is uniquely her own, that bridges her online and offline life, and that she makes no attempt to ‘cover up’:

I'm not going to make no effort online, but I'm not going to make any effort to cover up, you know... maybe it's slightly more formal in the blog because I know it's going to be assessed, but it's the same, there's definitely a voice in there that I think if you had a look at my personal blog you you could see a definite, you'd go 'okay I can tell these are the same person'. (Megan, PG student)

For others, authenticity is perceived as a requirement of their course:

I can't remember whether they said you know 'make sure you're creative and honest and free' but I felt like that was part of the criteria somehow, whether explicit or implicit. (Alex, PG student)

Alex expressed no particular discomfort with the idea of being required to be authentic in his online reflective space (which was structured as a blog), but notably the assessment criteria for his online reflection did *not* explicitly include such a requirement. He was not clear himself where the idea of being ‘creative and honest and free’ had come from – it was a ‘feeling’ that he associated with the activity, rather than an instruction given by his teachers or in his course material.

The distancing or anonymising effects of the online environment was seen by some interviewees to be associated with an increasing comfort with self-disclosure. Several lecturers on distance programmes saw a benefit to reflecting at a distance, because students will not have to face or deal socially with the lecturers who see their reflections, and can therefore be more open and honest:

some of them are very very honest and up front in their weblogs in a way which I really doubt that they would be if, if the pedagogy was a, a face to face you know course with a, a written diary or something. (Jane, lecturer, PG)

because they never meet us, they can in fact open their hearts and give very personal views about their difficulties, their hopes, their fears, you know, what, what's going on in

a way that they do admit, some of them, that they have never opened up to with their partners even. ...it's cathartic (Jess, lecturer, PG)

This openness may relate, as Dyson (1998) predicted, to the way that being online is reconfiguring what privacy and display mean, and how they are experienced:

As people feel more secure in general on the Net, they will become accustomed to seeing their words recorded and replayed. They will no longer feel uncomfortable being on display, since everyone around them is on display too... Everyone has personal preferences for privacy, but they are influenced by the surrounding culture and by the surrounding economy. (p.275)

This shift towards digital disclosure may produce quite personal reflections in the digital domain, and this can align well with the desire for authentic reflection that underpins reflective practice in many disciplines. Peter picked up on this point, and thought that the solitary, asynchronous context of online reflection provoked a degree of honesty and uninhibitedness even on programmes where teachers and students meet face to face:

some of them were reporting some quite you know personal stuff about feeling afraid and, ... there's something about the, I don't know whether it's the fact it's people, you know enter their, you know enter their details and write these things in the wee small hours of the morning when, you know, they've had a few beers or something... and and it's almost like a confession, like people write in their diaries about. (Peter, lecturer, UG)

Teachers are often worried about the implications of 'oversharing' online, though, and this produces a problematic tension for students when they are not clear about the line between authentic reflection and dangerous disclosure.

### **Risk: sharing too much information is dangerous**

Recent work on youth social media practices has revealed that, as boyd has pointed out, privacy remains important, but its meaning is different in mediated spaces, where it denotes the ability to "limit access through social conventions" (boyd, 2008, p.131), and where tactics such as "security through obscurity" replace structural boundaries (p.133). Despite these tactics, the erosion of privacy online is viewed as highly 'risky' in cultural discourses around blogging, and the dangers of too much disclosure are disturbing for students and teachers. Many experienced online disclosure as risky in the sense that it is or has the potential to become public, and to be misused:

I had a guy come to see me yesterday with a [public web] portfolio... and I just said to him 'look, you've given up enough information here if someone really wants to, to claim your identity' and he said to me 'what do you mean?' and I said 'name, address, date of birth, family name' and he went 'oooh my god' and [I] said 'so can you take that down off your [portfolio] now, can you sort it out', and I and we went through various documents that were on there to do with his portfolio and I said 'I'd like that off, I'd like that off, I'd like that off and I'd' and it was 'no no you'll mark me down' and I said 'no I won't. I won't mark you down.' (Sam, lecturer, UG)

Sam's students are allowed (though not required) to create their portfolios on a public web site, but she worries about the implications of what she sees as a lack of common sense in their approach to personal disclosure – both factually and in terms of what she calls the "darker parts" of reflection. At the same time, the student she discusses here clearly believes that he is required to make these disclosures, and fears being penalised when it comes to assessment if he does not. Like Alex's perception of 'honesty' as an assessment criterion, this student interprets

the task of reflection as a task of disclosure, and this creates problems for some teachers who fear the risks and consequences.

Some students have the same fears, and respond by withdrawing from or removing what is seen as personal from their online reflection:

Jen: how come you didn't put, be more sort of explicit about the kind of the depths of your soul or however you put it?

Dave (UG student): Um, because, I mean, again because you're not quite sure who's going to be reading it, or because [pause] and what I was writing in in the blog was honest I just, you know I just wasn't going to you know go in to the depths.

Similarly, Beth, an undergraduate student on a campus-based programme, explained that she would not communicate unhappiness about a course or lecturer in her (non-public) e-portfolio, because it would then be "floating around in this virtual, you know, this void somewhere [laughs]". This use of language is revealing: a dangerous void is perceived by some even in the safety of digital walled gardens.

Much has been written about the moral panics surrounding internet safety and risk, especially in relation to young people (Hope 2008, Carrington 2007), and as Efimova and Grudin (2007) argue, "people are not careful". The result is an undercurrent of fear, danger and caution which is certainly affecting how students and teachers approach their online reflective practices. This is at odds with many of the foundations of reflective practice; where what is personal becomes, through the process of reflective writing, fused with other materials of learning in ways which allow for independence and creative exploration (Creme, 2005, p.289). It is difficult (though perhaps not impossible) to square risk and fear with creative exploration, and negotiating that process requires more sensitivity on the part of teachers to the complex rhetorical strategies that online reflection demands. These strategies are not routinely discussed with or taught to students, and this is a serious gap in an increasingly common digital practice. At present the gap is filled in part by an intense concern on the part of students about a discourse of 'pretence' – they equate strategic performance with dishonesty. The cultural context of blogging positions the web as a medium for deception, and students energetically distance themselves from such a possibility.

### **Pretence: no one is really themselves online**

A key narrative around blogging and online presence in general is that, in contrast to the notion of authenticity and the associated riskiness of online disclosure, the web is a medium which facilitates deception. Research into online dating (Elison et al 2006) and teenagers' self-presentation in social networking (Bortree 2005), for example, emphasises the careful and self-conscious crafting of identity which goes on in spaces which are, for one reason or another, high-stakes. This is a delicate operation, however, as the appearance of authenticity remains extremely important.

I have previously suggested that in educational contexts students may commit with extra intensity to 'authenticating' the self they perform in reflection online, in order to regain or maintain a sense of control in a digital space which invites them, as Bayne (2005) has argued, towards a dangerous fluidity (Ross 2011). Adele had quite a sophisticated understanding of identity itself as performance:

you're always performing somehow I mean ... [pause] you know I think identity is made up of so many shades and it's, you can't really say the one is your true identity and the other one isn't. (Adele, PG student)

She was, nonetheless, adamant about her authenticity within her reflective space: “I don't have the feeling that it's, that I put on a different identity for it. [pause] ...I never had the feeling that I was making this up”. Identity may be fluid, in other words, but it is still under her control.

One lecturer in my research explained how her students embraced and even demanded their tutors' presence in their reflective space:

I've been able to log on and see what they've they've been doing, literally on a daily basis if I wanted to. We did give the students the option to not have me do that and to take me off that facility. What was interesting was, the students were all unanimous in that, no no, they wanted that. ...what they were actually saying was that made them think about how to use it and how to behave in in terms of recording their reflective journal. (Maria, lecturer, UG)

For these students, having their behaviour monitored was preferable to the doubt over their engagement, or of getting it wrong, that *not* being monitored opened up. I think this is partly about being seen to be a 'real' reflective person who is observable at any time because they are doing what they are supposed to do. Alex was quite explicit about this, describing his choice not to edit his blog before submitting it for assessment because, he explained, he thought it would demonstrate his 'journey' better:

I didn't think that assessment wise it would benefit from [editing] cause I thought that it, that the assessment would probably include whether there was a journey as well, well maybe not directly but I think, it wasn't being assessed as a finished work, it was being assessed as a diary, my reflective work, so it doesn't really make sense to edit what you thought at the time cause that's still valid. (Alex, PG student)

The 'othering' of the blogger in the press and other popular media produces a range of ambivalent positions on the part of teachers and students. Alex's orientation towards assessment is also interesting because it suggests a response to the problem of blogging being seen as an illegitimate or narcissistic activity – to stress the extent to which it is being done as a requirement, externally imposed, rather than as a result of a desire on the part of the student.

### **Othering: what kind of person would share that with the whole world?**

An important aspect of popular narratives of blogging is that they are very often constructed by outsiders who examine blogging culture and practices from a conspicuous distance. There is a discourse of othering running through many if not most media reports, editorials and even some academic literature (for example, Nardi et al 2004) on the subject, where blogging is very often represented as the sort of thing that *other kinds of people* would do. Sometimes blogging behaviour is even pathologised, as in Buffardi and Campbell (2008) and Jacobs (2003), who claims that “the very interactive nature of blogging makes it innately supportive of both exhibitionistic and voyeuristic behaviours” (p.2).

This tendency to view bloggers as strange or 'other' extends to some of the teachers I spoke with:

I [pause] I don't know why people blog. I, I'm not, it doesn't appeal particularly. [pause] I can see having a public voice on the web would be nice, but it assumes that people are interested in what you've got to say and it means that you know that you have to have interesting things to say every week or twice a week, and that's not really a pressure that I particularly want but, a lot of people obviously do, so. (Jane, lecturer, PG)

Students, too, make comments which emphatically demonstrate their non-blogger status:

Jen: do you think at all about what you do, were doing in [the e-portfolio] as being like a weblog?

Beth (UG student): No, not really. No, I just, I just see it as a means of me getting, you know, getting my work done, really.

Jen: Yeah, okay. Um, and what do you think about kind of blogging, in the world, more generally?

Beth: ...I can't see me doing it. Maybe I feel like I, I honestly haven't got anything interesting to say, but I just think I haven't really got time and I don't... And what I think I just kind of kind of keep it to myself, I'm not really bothered about spreading it internationally! It's not a, not a great urge of mine, and I just, well, who'd read it, who'd really care, you know?

In order to stake a claim of not being like the people described above, students and teachers have to distance themselves from their own practices to some extent. They do not want to be seen as one of the strange, narcissistic people who *choose* to engage in blogging practices (writing or reading):

"I don't read other blogs really. I'm just not that interested. If people have got something to tell me they'll come and tell me. And I'm not in to the big brother idea. I've never watched that programme. I just, um I don't see the fascination that some people have with knowing everything about certain people's moves. (Theresa, UG student)

For students, who generally have not had a choice about whether to engage in online reflection, the claim is that they are just doing what is required of them, that it is nothing to do with who they are; arguably not a very conducive starting position from which to develop reflective habits: "a lot of students will start by saying 'oh my god I hate blogging, why are you, why are you asking me to do this?'" (Jane, lecturer, PG). For teachers, who in many cases design these practices, or at least are responsible for promoting them to students, the claim would seem to be more subtle: that their practices are different, are not of the risky, self-absorbed, problematic sort that they can critique as well as anyone:

I think there's a big psychological risk to being online too much. You know why do we want to go out and, I don't know ... I'll tell you what I think it is, I think it's this celebrity, cult of celebrity thing" (Sam, lecturer, UG)

For both students and teachers, there is a shadow hanging over their online reflective practice, one that illustrates the extent to which discourses of blogging leak into educational settings.

### **Narcissism: bloggers are shallow and self-obsessed**

As we saw above, most discourses of blogging 'other' the blogger in ways that are problematic for educational uses of online reflection. The most common charge is that only narcissistic, self-involved people blog. Guadagno et al (2008) claim that bloggers are predisposed towards neuroticism, while Curtain characterises the primary emotion of the blogger as one of anxiety:

Anxiety may be the primary emotion associated with giving accounts of blogging, and perhaps of blogging itself — Do I update enough? Why don't I write? Who is reading me? Why aren't there more? What do they think about what I say? Have I said enough about enough... (2004, online)

The discourse of the self-obsessed blogger is pervasive and problematic for the use of online reflection in educational contexts. Some students may be happy to claim and perhaps subvert these less flattering descriptions:

I'm a show off and loudmouth by nature ... So, I kind of feel like I'm happy for anybody to see sort of anything about me, I'm the sort of person who has a public profile on Facebook. [laughter] (Megan, PG student)

Megan's confident construction of herself as naturally 'showing off' indicates both a clear understanding of the discourse, and a certain degree of powerlessness in the face of an intrinsic character trait. Other students are more susceptible to anxieties when they are reflecting online, especially when they are aware that their teachers can see their work at any time, and may be looking. It is notable, I think, how closely Charles' questions here echo Curtain's above:

this kind of kind of dependency like one gets hooked on cigarettes or something [laughter], one kind of gets hooked on the tutor and thought, you know, 'oh, why is she taking so long to mark this?', you know 'why aren't I getting any feedback now?', and it wasn't long at all! ... 'oh, she's forgotten about me, oh that's a real shame'. 'Oh, didn't I make more impression than that?' [laugh] (Charles, PG student)

Charles believes that his task is to make an impression on his teacher – and that the mark of his success will be if he provokes her feedback. He sees himself as having been addicted, 'like one gets hooked on cigarettes or something', to her response, and both desperate and helpless in the face of her silence. Mallan argues that, rather than implying mental health issues on the part of the blogger, these sorts of fears of invisibility are a fundamental aspect of the construction of "shifting subject positions" online:

These subject positions are not just ontological states, but inevitably entail a politics of visibility, both at the personal level and at the level of technological infrastructure. It is this 'visibility' which gives rise to epithets of narcissism and susceptibility. (2009, p.51-2)

Another possible response to this charge of narcissism is to view blogging in a very pragmatic, commodified way, tapping into discourses of employability and personal branding. The online context intensifies questions of what should not be said, as we have seen, and also about how to put a 'best face forward', how to leverage online presence as 'personal brand' to best effect.

### **Commodification: your online presence is your personal brand**

Within the framing of the web as medium for deliberate self-presentation, there is increasingly the notion that it is essential for success in today's world to nurture and manage a highly visible "personal brand" online. This discourse is managerial and market-driven:

A strong personal brand identity ideally can endure for decades... To be successful, aspirants must adapt to the growing maturity of the marketplace, competitive threats, changes in social mores and values, proliferation of communication channels, and other factors that serve to challenge brand resilience. (Rein et al 2005, p.349)

The personal brand which lasts for decades is cast as not only a benefit, but one which can and must be harnessed and controlled by the 'aspirant'. Cultivating a personal brand requires a strategic and calculating posture towards online disclosure and identity, and just the right combination of authenticity and marketing prowess. Some students, taking this to heart, are very concerned about getting their online reflections 'right' in the first instance, and wary of losing control of their message online:

It felt safer writing it in a Word document first. There's something about writing directly you know into an online format whatever that is more [pause] live I suppose... I need to be absolutely sure that what I'm writing is what I want to write because it might it might disappear onto the internet at any time, you know? [laugh] ...maybe it's something to do



with um what you, sort of preconceptions of what a blog is and what the internet is ...you know, that blogs are very public things. (Lynne, PG student)

Because it felt risky, public and 'live', Lynne put off her engagement with the online reflective space so that she entered it only when she was sure of what she wanted to say. Lynne's cautious approach would seem to bear out Kimball's concern that the persistent nature of digital archives may cause students to back away from a more spontaneous, authentic process of reflection (2005, p.454). The fear of losing something in the web – something which can never be retrieved, but that will forever follow and mark its author – is where the risk of disclosure meets the promise of the personal brand, and it is extremely problematic for traditional notions of what reflective practice should be about.

Personal branding also goes hand in hand with a stated need to stand out in what is often referred to as an 'attention economy' (Lanham 2007). Here again, students are aware of and engaged with the possibilities for their reflective online spaces, even if it is not immediately intended for a wider audience:

there's something quite motivating and engaging about just publishing something even if it's only to one person... if I wanted to I could share it publicly and I could promote it and I could get people to look at it. And even though I'm not doing that I kindof know that I could. (Alex, PG student)

The rhetoric of empowerment and professionalisation that blogging carries with it depends to a large extent on a belief in the control of the individual over their brand, and the harnessing of the web for the individual's goals and purposes. However, even if bloggers manage only to release aspects of themselves which are professionally appropriate, the archive constitutes a form of compulsory memory over which individuals have little control: "we do not produce our databased selves, the databased selves produce us" (Simon 2005, 16). Database-driven technologies for *storing* the data produced in online reflection may, in the case of public or potentially public reflection, produce a radical recontextualisation, as "digital archives allow situational context to collapse with ease. ...search engines can collapse any data at any period of time" (boyd 2001, 33). A remixed, recontextualised version of yourself may bear little resemblance to the identity you are trying to project. The carefully crafted online personal brand is therefore an illusion, and a constraining one at that.

## Conclusion

There is a growing openness in higher education to an e-learning agenda which positions new digital 'tools' as the answer to market needs, globalisation, and a new generation of so-called digital native consumer-students, without an accompanying critical stance which would support students and teachers to engage creatively and carefully with digital practices and cultures (Clegg et al, 2003; Goodfellow and Lea 2007; Bayne and Ross 2011). These tools and environments are neither innocent nor culturally neutral, though, as they are "inscribed with social meaning, power relations, possibilities for and restrictions on the expression of personal identity" (Goodfellow and Lea 2007, p.128), and their use in higher education can produce many points of tension.

As we saw in the previous section, new pressures and problems are produced when reflection moves online. Cultural constructions of the blog as a space of con-

fession, the reconfiguration of privacy online, and a perceived need to ‘prove’ one’s authenticity in the face of a web which facilitates deception sit uneasily with the riskiness and danger associated with too much disclosure. Too much disclosure also carries with it the possible charge of narcissism, and the construction of a ‘bad’ personal brand, archived forever. It is clear that new rhetorical strategies are needed to make the best use of online reflective spaces, and that more explicit engagement with the ‘webness’ of these practices is urgently required. In particular, online reflection in higher education requires a new orientation towards authenticity that takes account of issues of power, identity and disclosure in the online context.

Lillis describes a dominant “practice of mystery” (2001, p.74) surrounding academic writing in higher education. In her research context, teachers know what they want and expect students to know how to deliver it. In online reflective practices, teachers are in a new and complex space in which they do not always know what they want. This is partly, as Carpenter claims, because online literacy practices are at odds with notions of boundary crossing, joining the club, or “insiderdom” (Russell et al 2009, p.413) that characterise traditional academic practices (Carpenter 2009, p.142). It is also because a discourse of replication is so prevalent in the sphere of e-learning, claiming that online practices can be imported wholesale from their offline counterparts. This is, quite simply, not so.

As teachers, we need to review and revise how we induct students into the practice of online reflective writing, and what we expect of their online reflections. This could mean, for instance, being more definite in welcoming students’ fictions, and their experiments with voice and subjectivity, whether cautious or playful. At present students feel they must, at all costs, be seen to be authentic in their online reflections, and this, paradoxically, is hampering their understanding of and engagement with a challenging mode of writing. If explicitly offered the online reflective space as a space of construction, experimentation and refinement – as a challenge to situate themselves as academic and professional actors within a particular disciplinary framework – the need for a strategic approach could be less confusing, and more rewarding for students.

The values of authenticity and personal development need to be reviewed for networked learning contexts which are social in complex ways, and enmeshed in webs which do not respect boundaries separating vernacular and academic discourses or spaces. Some university teachers are actively exploring these kinds of new perspectives, and are both excited and challenged by what they are finding. For example, Hughes and Purnell (2008) have been working with e-portfolios, and are concluding that:

the new landscapes may offer exciting ‘openings’ (Stronach and MacLure, 1997) for learning and teaching that support the shift from traditional anxious academic literacy practices of monologic addressivity to a more fluid and exciting literacy ‘infidelity’ allowing for increasing dialogue and exchange within student groups. (p.151)

More broadly, as researchers into networked learning we should always be attending to networks in both senses described in the early part of this chapter: purposeful digital connections, and inevitable digital flows. In their networked learning practices, students and teachers are working at the boundaries of the deliberate and the unruly, and this is a difficult and fascinating space which would benefit from more exploration and creative and critical attention.

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## Traces of self: online reflective practices and performances in higher education

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This paper explores issues emerging from the question of how students and teachers negotiate issues of identity, authenticity, ownership, privacy and performativity in high-stakes online reflection in higher education. I examine in particular the notion of traces as both inscriptions and archives. Working online amplifies the destabilising and disturbing effects of compulsory reflection, and the combination greatly complicates the humanist notions that legitimise their use: that there is a 'true self' which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing about thoughts and experiences. Online reflective practices are implemented without acknowledgement of the difference being online makes, and issues of power in high-stakes reflection are disguised or ignored. These practices normalise surveillance of students' emotional and developmental expression, and produce rituals of confession and compliance.

**Keywords:** online reflection; higher education; e-learning; masks; trace; confession

### Introduction

This paper explores conceptual issues emerging from the question of how students and teachers negotiate issues of identity, authenticity, ownership, privacy and performativity in high-stakes online reflection in higher education. I argue that working online amplifies the destabilising and disturbing effects of compulsory reflection, and that the combination greatly complicates the humanist notions that legitimise their use: that there is a 'true self' which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing about thoughts and experiences in educational contexts. Online reflective practices are imported wholesale from their offline counterparts without acknowledgement of the difference being online makes, and issues of power in high-stakes reflection are disguised or ignored in discourses of authentic self-knowledge, personal and professional development, the improvement of practice and transformative learning. These discourses are not appropriate to the nature of assessed or otherwise high-stakes online reflection, and the combination normalises surveillance of students' emotional and developmental expression, and produces rituals of confession and compliance. In this paper, I explore the notion of traces, which refer to both inscriptions (what traces we can find of gaps, silences or other meanings in language and practices) and archives (the

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traces we leave behind, as with computer-mediated communication). My theoretical approach is informed by poststructuralist perspectives, in particular the work of Foucault and Derrida.

Although there are specific technologies currently associated with online reflection in education, primarily electronic portfolios (e-portfolios) and weblogs (blogs), I deliberately avoid focusing in what follows on any particular technology, and instead refer where possible to 'online reflection' or 'online reflective practices'. Lines between different online environments are constantly shifting and blurring, and a focus on practices rather than technologies offers better scope for exploring the issues of interest here.

There is an emphasis in what follows on policy and practice in the UK, which differs in important respects from, for example, North America or Europe. In particular, the UK's Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA 2000, 2009) Progress Files initiative requires universities to provide structure and support for personal development planning (PDP) for all students. This policy move has resulted in a flurry of interest in reflection, especially online reflection, and institutions are embedding PDP at a number of different levels, including by assessing it as part of the formal curriculum. This policy is having a major impact on how reflection is perceived and integrated in Higher Education (HE) in the UK: 'as enshrined in PDP... reflection is now expected to form part of every student's analytical learning-to-learn armoury' (Clegg 2004, 292).

### **Discourses of reflection: an array of meanings**

Apart from the policy drivers mentioned above, reflective writing and practices are an extremely important element of teaching and learning (and, increasingly, assessment) in many disciplines, particularly those with a professional or vocational focus. This does not mean, however, that there is a common definition of reflection in the literature or in practice. Fendler (2003) draws out four interrelated theoretical threads of the educational uses of reflection: Cartesian rationality, Dewey's reflective thinking, Schön's reflective practice and feminist concerns with voice and agency. She argues that discourses around reflective writing in education are confused and confusing, and incorporate 'an array of meanings', including 'a demonstration of self consciousness, a scientific approach to planning for the future, a tacit and intuitive understanding of practice, a discipline to become more professional, a way to tap into one's authentic inner voice, a means to become... more effective..., and a strategy to redress injustices in society' (2003, 19). Moon, on the other hand, identifies four slightly different theoretical sources of reflective practices (Dewey, Habermas, Schön and Kolb), but maintains that these are merely 'frameworks of meaning' imposed on the 'simple mental process' that is reflection (1999b, 93): a purposeful consideration of complex or open-ended problems or ideas (98).

My stance is that reflective practices in higher education always produce certain subject positions and power relations, which are too often ignored or overlooked. This leaves students and teachers to negotiate extremely tricky practices such as online reflection and high-stakes reflection without a strong critical awareness of

their complexity. Reflection in education is generally grounded in a humanist discourse of a 'true' or 'central' self which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of writing about thoughts and experiences. This discourse underpins the various projects of reflective writing in higher education as described by (for example) Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), Brockbank and McGill (1998) and Moon (1999a). However, it is problematic for two main reasons: it masks the increasingly invasive character of educational practices which demand confession and self-surveillance as evidence of progress and learning, and it assumes a knowable, malleable yet cohesive self at its centre. These problems are greatly exacerbated by the increasingly common use of online and high-stakes reflection, as we will see.

### **Raising the stakes: the nature of high-stakes reflection**

I group online reflective practices in higher education into four main categories: informal, extra-curricular, low stakes and high stakes. Some students, tutors, lecturers and researchers engage in voluntary reflective writing, primarily blogging, outside the formal structures of their institutions. These practices can be intimately connected with research, teaching and learning but are *informal* in nature. *Extra-curricular* activities, structures or processes are often put in place in institutions to support transferable skills, PDP and employability agendas. These are usually unrelated to formal coursework and are often supported by Career Development staff, personal tutors or directors of study, or provided as optional and non-supported activities through an institutional e-portfolio or purpose-built PDP system. These activities are both dependent upon and intended to foster self-motivated learners who value reflection and are prepared to invest time in writing about their own progress in an institutionally provided or sanctioned digital space (Clegg 2004). The evidence so far indicates that take-up by students in these initiatives is low, but the rhetoric around these activities will be increasingly heard as universities invest heavily in systems to meet their obligations under schemes such as the UK's QAA's (2000) Progress Files policy initiative.

Online reflection is often included as part of a course or programme as a non-assessed, non-compulsory, peer-assessed or minimally formatively assessed component. In some cases, this 'low stakes' reflection is intended as a developmental stage towards a summatively assessed project. In other cases, it is supposed to be entirely student-led and (particularly in professional education) habitual as students strive to become members of professional communities which prize self-regulation and continuing professional development. In addition, discourses of 'effective' or 'deep' learning often privilege the ability to reflect and self-regulate as the hallmark of a good student (Nota, Soresia, and Zimmerman 2004).

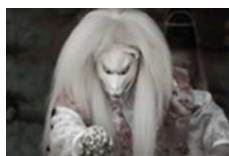
Teachers are sometimes wary of assessing reflective writing directly as it is assumed to be an inappropriate object of judgement or measures of quality (Hargreaves 2004, Hinett 2002), and these competing discourses – to be a good student you have to reflect, but reflective writing belongs outside the academic gaze – may partly account for the many reports in the literature about confusion and modest participation from students (Tosh et al. 2005) in low-stakes reflection.



I define *high-stakes* reflection as reflection which is summatively assessed or which serves a gatekeeping function in terms of entry, progression or continued membership of a profession or professional body. The specific rubrics or standards applied to these practices vary from discipline to discipline and course to course, as do the models of reflection they are based on,<sup>1</sup> but they usually involve judgements of critical thought, the application of theory, evidence of growth and development, and the impact of institutional learning on individual practice. I propose the metaphor of high-stakes online reflection as ‘mask’, and I have identified six (overlapping) genres of mask: performance, disguise, protection, transformation, discipline and trace.

## Performance

2



Theatrical traditions around the world involve performers donning masks to portray different characters, and Goffman’s (1969) work is extremely helpful in untangling some of the complexities of identity performance in everyday life. One key issue documented in recent e-portfolio literature concerns ‘conflicting’ or ‘competing’ paradigms – ‘positivist’ (product-driven, performative, externally assessed, based on externally defined outcomes) vs. ‘constructivist’ (process-driven, reflective, learner-constructed outcomes) (Barrett and Carney 2005). The model of a learner-centred and -owned process, which is intrinsically motivating and a stepping stone towards lifelong reflective practice, sits on one hand, while on the other are institutional and professional demands for accountability, evidence and the performance of professional or academic identities (Barrett and Carney 2005). However, in high-stakes reflection at least, the apparent tension between these ‘conflicting’ paradigms is in fact an intrinsic part of reflective writing. When what is being assessed and monitored is the learner’s ability to be authentically reflective,<sup>3</sup> then reflection itself is performative, and claims for the authenticity and intrinsically motivating nature of reflection become part of the performance of a reflective identity which is produced in the complex space of compulsory, high-stakes practices.

## Disguise

4



The idea of a person's 'true self' or, in some cases, their deformity, being hidden behind a mask is an extremely common metaphor in art, literature, popular culture and in everyday life. Power is also often described as being 'masked': 'power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms' (Foucault 1998, 86). This intersects with a Foucauldian understanding of the workings of neo-liberal governmentality, where governing power is decentred and located within individuals, who become responsible for their own surveillance (Lemke 2001). Goals of self-regulation, authenticity and personal development are intimately connected with governance, the market and the creation and control of the professional, but these connections are rarely discussed with or revealed to students, or perhaps even recognised by teachers.

The rhetoric of self-fulfilment and self-awareness disguises practices that are fundamentally prescriptive, being bound, as Hargreaves argues, 'within the ethical code of [a] profession' (2004, 200) (perhaps we can substitute 'ethical code' and 'profession' with 'learning outcomes' and 'course' here). Rather than being diametrically opposed to a performative discourse, as Barrett and Carney claim, learner-centred discourses informing reflective practice in higher education are 'easily transformed into the kind of instrumentalism which underpins the increasingly dominant training and enterprise culture... learners can be more readily manipulated under the guise of democratic participation and personal empowerment' (Usher and Edwards 1994, 29).

## Protection

5



Protective masks are worn while doing dangerous activities (fencing or welding for example). The deliberate use of what Hargreaves (2004) calls 'legitimate narratives' of reflection on the part of students can be seen as a way of dealing with stress and uncertainty, and the sense that their stories and experiences may not be acceptable. My interviews with students reveal that they generally have a good idea of what is a legitimate narrative within their own context, and are attentive to the signals that their teachers give in this respect. Students are also strategic about the extent to

which they ‘get personal’ within a high-stakes reflective space, often resisting voicing what they consider to be personal thoughts or experiences.

## Transformation

6



Formal, ritual performances involving masks are transformative in the moment, but may also have a lasting impact on communities and individuals. Yancey argues that ‘What we ask students to do is who we ask them to be’ (2004, 739), and in many cases reflective writing is seen by lecturers as ‘good’ if it demonstrates that a student is able to ‘talk like’ the professional they aspire to be. As I argue in the next section, as students practice writing within compulsory and often highly structured online reflective spaces, their own experiences are shaped and transformed. Furthermore, the personal and professional development agenda in higher education constitutes individuals as particular sorts of ‘subjects-in-process’, for whom no amount of development is ever enough: ‘All professional workers need to be developed. Moreover, there should be no end to this process – the true professional knows that learning is for life’ (McWilliam 2002, 1). The pressure to be constantly developing shapes individuals to meet the market’s demand for flexible, self-regulating workers who will accept employers’ demands for ‘explicit confessional critical reflection’ (Fenwick 2001, 82), and even to internalise these in forms of voluntary self-surveillance and confession, an idea I return to in the last section of this paper, by looking at blogging practices.

## Discipline

7



The scold's bridle was used in Scotland from at least the mid-sixteenth century to punish women for talking too much, nagging or inappropriate speech – it worked by restraining and sometimes injuring the tongue.<sup>8</sup> There is self-discipline involved in establishing habits of reflection and reflective writing, and methods of constraint and strategies of self-constraint in high-stakes reflection governing what students can and will say. Furthermore, disciplinarity shapes the sorts of reflection that are desired – demonstrating again that the notion of 'reflection' has many different meanings, as Fendler (2003) has argued.

## Trace

9



The death mask constitutes a physical trace or archive of the person who has died. It is obviously not *for* the person it represents, and nor does that person have any say or control over the matter, making it an interesting route to exploring agency and archive in online reflective practices. Database-driven technologies for *storing* the data produced in online reflection may produce radical recontextualisation of identity. At the same time, as we will see in the next section, the archive constitutes a form of compulsory memory over which we may have little control.

So, drawing on the metaphor of the mask, high-stakes online reflection may offer a narrative of the student's self, which disguises their more complicated or perhaps 'illegitimate' (Hargreaves 2004) thoughts or experiences. It may allow or require certain types of performances – for example that of the 'good student', or the 'autonomous learner' – and be constraining, painful or transformative as the student's voice is disciplined (Foucault 1975) through the analytical interventions of teachers, peers or professional mentors. Finally, it may constitute traces or

archives by which a student's virtual face can be captured – with or without their knowledge or consent (Kimball 2005).

There *is* a tension at the heart of high-stakes reflective practices: the arguments for assessing reflection assert that it *can* be assessed because it truthfully captures traces of students' developing selfhood, while the practice of assessment itself destabilises those constructions of selfhood and reveals them to be performances, disguises and disciplines. For instance, Hargreaves (2004) argues that compulsory reflective practices are essentially narrative in character. She claims that: 'in producing narratives for assessment students are being asked to produce a story, and ... in nursing (and possibly other professional settings) only three 'stories' are legitimate' (199). She identifies these as 'valedictory', 'condemnatory' and 'redemptive' narratives (200). In constructing a narrative for the purposes of assessment, the successful student understands which kinds of stories are legitimate, and shapes her words accordingly.

Hargreaves leaves unexplored, however, the question of what the relationship of these narratives to a true or authentic self might be. To answer this, I turn to poststructuralist theory, which conceives of subjectivity and language as intimately entwined. The poststructuralist subject, online or off, does not choose from an infinite number of possible selves which identity to perform. The relationship between subjectivity and language is symbiotic: 'Lives are narratable as coherent in terms of the categories language makes available' (Belsey 2002, 51). These categories of coherence map on to embodied situations: gender, race, class, sexuality and (dis)ability. They also map on to available social discourses and contexts, out of which the subject may construct meaningful identities. Perhaps Hargreaves' legitimate narratives discipline members and prospective members of communities of practice into certain understandings of themselves and their identities. It may be impossible to conceive of 'being a nurse', for example, without reference to the categories of coherence and cultural meanings that 'being a nurse' makes available.

Davies maintains that the poststructuralist subject 'is constantly in process; it only exists as process; it is revised and (re)presented through images, metaphors, storylines and other features of language, such as pronoun grammar; it is spoken and resoken, each speaking existing in a palimpsest with the others' (1997, 275).

Taking up the metaphor of the palimpsest, though, raises the question: is there an essential self (the 'paper' foundation of the layered palimpsest) which can be revealed through reflection? Or should we ask, with Butler: 'what kinds of constructions are foreclosed through the figuring of this site as outside or beneath construction itself?' (1993, 28). We might think of these closed off constructions as 'traces', in the Derridean sense: the (n)ever-present origin, that which is absent and always already unspeakable when we pretend – for the sake of being able to speak at all – that concepts like 'self' are clear: 'the trace is not only the disappearance of origin ... it means that the origin did not ever disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which then becomes the origin of the origin' (Derrida 1997, 61).

### Online reflection: layering, authenticating and archiving

Working online amplifies the effects of compulsory reflection in the form of assessed reflective practices, and the combination greatly complicates the humanist notions of

the 'true self' and authenticity in educational contexts that legitimise their use. Online reflective practices occupy the territory of experience and selfhood in especially volatile and shifting ways. The notion of an authentic, choosing, reflecting self already brought into question by poststructuralist theory is further destabilised by digital representations, which are like liquid: always in motion (editable, non-material), but often leaving permanent traces (archives). A sense of fragmentation has been shown to be particularly pronounced within certain kinds of environments on the Internet, in what Turkle describes as: 'a new practice of identity as multiplicity in online life' (1997, 260).

However, the Internet is not a homogenous whole, but a patchwork of different kinds of spaces and tools, and the ones most likely to be used in higher education are those where online identities are meant to map fairly closely on to offline 'student' or 'teacher' identities and bodies (virtual learning environments, for example). Much as reflection is supposed to authentically mirror a stable, autonomous self, so the 'walled gardens' of institutional learning spaces online are supposed to provide the authentication necessary for both learner and teacher to feel sure that others (and they) are who they are meant to be. Logging in, in other words, forces us into certain subject positions (Land and Bayne 2002).

Furthermore, students themselves may strongly resist a loss of control they see implicit in the possibility of fragmentation online. Bayne (2005) found that students experience the online self as a threat to the 'real' self, and feel themselves to be invited towards a dangerous fluidity: 'without the safety net of our commitment to a truthful, unitary identity, we might fall permanently into another (untrue) version of ourselves. Identity formation online becomes a performance here, with the risk of the role taking control of the player'. Students may therefore commit with extra intensity to 'authenticating' the self they perform in reflection online. This authentication may readily take the form of efforts to 'prove' their sincerity through what Foucault describes as the 'obligation to confess', a possibility that reflective practice makes available and possibly actively encourages (Gilbert 2001). The student may in this case be both 'penitent' and 'listener', in the terms of the confession (Hewitt, in Gilbert 2001, 202), when they try to gain a secure footing online through confessional reflection, and to be 'authenticated by the discourse of truth [they are] obliged to pronounce concerning [themselves]' (Foucault 1998, 58). Ironically, the structure of the confessional offered (or at least pretended at) a mask of anonymity which online reflective practices do not allow. Students are disciplined from without and within in online reflection by urgent demands for authentication.

Such demands may be both tempered and reinforced by an awareness of the permanence or potential exposure of the traces being set down online. Database-driven technologies for *storing* the data produced in online reflection may, in the case of public or potentially public reflection (blogs, for instance), produce a radical recontextualisation, as 'digital archives allow situational context to collapse with ease... search engines can collapse any data at any period of time' (Boyd 2001, 33). At the same time, and regardless of the extent to which it is public, the archive constitutes a form of compulsory memory over which we may have little control: 'we do not produce our databased selves, the databased selves produce us' (Simon 2005, 16). As Land and Bayne have argued in relation to virtual learning environments, 'archival fixity and retrievability' (2002) binds learners to the words and actions of their online past. Like Kimball, I consider this to be potentially antithetical to the

supposedly constructivist and learner-centred pedagogies which underpin much reflective practice, discouraging students from taking risks, experimenting or expressing uncertainty (Kimball 2005, 454). However, the ‘institutional appetite for data’ that Kimball (2005, 438) wants to shield students from is only part of the wider picture of online reflective practices.

### A cultural moment

Online reflective writing in higher education, whether publicly visible, limited to small groups of learners, or restricted to just a student and their teacher, is profoundly influenced by wider cultural understandings of blogging and personal disclosure and risk online. As Carpenter contends, ‘[electronic] environments allow for and even encourage active integration and dynamic interaction, resulting in a mixing of genres and literacy practices that does not respect conventional categories, divisions, or dichotomies, including the border that separates... the popular from the academic’ (2009, 144).

Blogging is a genre which privileges individual voice, addressivity and a blurred distinction between public and private spheres (Walker 2008). We can see in current blogging practices both within and outside academia a convergence of the rise of the concept of personal branding (Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney 2005; Peters 1997), and what Scott describes as the ‘cultural tendency to seek out confessional narratives of self-disclosure’ (2004, 92). This convergence exposes a number of tensions: between self-promotion and authenticity; between accusations of narcissism and pressures to confess; and between moral panics around privacy and safety and a growing sense that online invisibility equates to personal and professional negligence, and that the more presence the better.

The idea that the blog as a whole is a reflection of a coherent and knowable self is a powerful one for bloggers (Ewins 2005, Holbrook 2006). As Reed comments, ‘[bloggers] treat weblogs as straightforward indexes of self; they commonly assert that “my blog is me”’ (2005, 227). Research is also showing that blog audiences have strong expectations about the authenticity of bloggers. Freidrich (2007) explicitly connects the authority of a blog to its perceived authenticity, arguing that online audiences are especially attuned to cues of authenticity because of the increased possibility of anonymity and deception accompanying online writing. She maintains that ‘aware of the constant possibility that a fictional text may be posing as non-fiction, readers online have been exhaustive in investigating suspicious texts’ (Freidrich 2007, 63). Kitmann (2003) links audience expectations of online authorship to Lejeune’s theory of the ‘autobiographical pact’ of truthfulness and authenticity entered into by authors and readers of work in that genre: ‘web-based forms of self-documentation are so concerned about... violation [of the autobiographical pact] that “reality” has been almost fetishized’ (59). This performance of truth demanded by audiences in this genre can produce intense feelings of personal exposure. Curtain (2006) characterises the primary emotion of the blogger as one of anxiety: ‘Do I updated [sic] enough? Why don’t I write? Who is reading me? Why aren’t there more? What do they think about what I say?’

Holbrook argues, however, that it is the *assumption* of truth that matters, and that many bloggers play with the pact (2006, 9). As well they might, because at the same time as authenticity takes centre stage in the blogger–reader relationship, a

managerial and market-driven discourse of the 'personal brand', essential for success in today's world, provokes a calculating and strategic approach to self-disclosure:

A strong personal brand identity ideally can endure for decades... To be successful, aspirants must adapt to the growing maturity of the marketplace, competitive threats, changes in social mores and values, proliferation of communication channels, and other factors that serve to challenge brand resilience. How frequently and how radically the identity is transformed to sustain depends on the aspirant's sector. (Rein et al. 2005, 349)

Change and development is framed here as a market demand rather than a personal need – quite different from, and arguably more superficial than, the pedagogical models of reflection discussed above. The message, however, is the same: change, and be seen to change. The promise (or threat) of a personal brand which lasts for decades has echoes of the archive, but is recast as not only a benefit, but one which can and must be harnessed and controlled by the 'aspirant'. Indeed, Eichhorn argues that the concept of the archive itself is changing as a wave of self-representation emerges: 'In blogs and other social networking spaces, the drive to collect and re/present one's self is apparent in a myriad of emerging forms of expression... part of the radical reconfiguration of the archive currently underway'. (2008, 3)

There is a growing openness in higher education to an e-learning agenda which positions new digital 'tools' as the answer to market needs, globalisation, and a new generation of so-called digital native consumer-students, without an accompanying critical stance which would support students and teachers to engage creatively and carefully with digital practices and cultures. These tools and environments are neither innocent nor culturally neutral, as they are 'inscribed with social meaning, power relations, possibilities for and restrictions on the expression of personal identity' (Goodfellow and Lea 2007, 128).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have identified and explored some important theoretical issues impacting on high-stakes online reflective practices. These are the humanist discourse underpinning reflective practices; governance, the market and the discipline of confession and development; the performative nature of assessment and assessed reflection; masks as metaphors for understanding how students may knowingly perform or (in the case of the trace) be performed in high-stakes reflection; the complexity of identity and authenticity online; archives and the permanence of online data; and cultural understandings of blogging.

There are powerful tensions and traces inherent in these reflective practices. I do not think that these are grounds for criticising students or teachers, or even necessarily making the case that reflective practices should be abolished. Rather, what is needed next is some insight into how people think about, negotiate and transform these complicated issues in practice, and this is the focus of my research as it goes forward. After all, as Youdell reminds us, the trace, or 'subordinate discourse' in Foucault's terms, does yet another piece of work:

[Derrida asserts] that any performative is open to misfire and so might fail or do...something unintended or unexpected. And Foucault's (1990a) account of



discourse insists that no discourse is guaranteed – while particular discourses prevail in some contexts and endure over time, the potential for the meanings of these to shift and/or for subordinate discourses to unsettle these remains. (2006, 515)

High-stakes online reflective practices constitute a demanding and invasive form of educational practice. Here the convergence of surveillance, authentication, assessment and reflection exposes students and teachers to a new intensity of gaze and to increased demands for confession-as-performance. Rather than revealing and developing a true and unitary self, reflecting online and for assessment produces fragmented, performing, cautious, strategic selves. As a result, it offers an opportunity to work with an awareness of audience and the development of professional and academic voices. As teachers we need to be able to look critically at these practices and make choices which leave space for us, and our students, to subvert and unsettle the prevailing discourses of reflection in digital spaces.

## Notes

1. For example, Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), Brookfield (1995), Gibbs (1988), Johns (2004), Kolb and Fry (1975), Moon (1999b) and Schön (1991).
2. Creative Commons licensed work by Giant Ginkgo. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/giantginkgo/162974551/>
3. Authenticity in learning is a complex and contested concept (Kreber et al. 2007). I am defining authenticity in the Heideggerian sense of 'ownness' or 'mineness' – an unmediated orientation to the self (Carman 2009).
4. Stock image by Brasil2, <http://www.istockphoto.com/stock-photo-3661335-anonymous.php>
5. Stock image by KeithBinns, <http://www.istockphoto.com/stock-photo-3680198-greek-helmet.php>
6. Stock image by stellalevi, <http://www.istockphoto.com/stock-photo-5664426-african-mask-on-white.php>
7. © 2005 David Monniaux; [http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Branks\\_dsc05369.jpg](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Branks_dsc05369.jpg)
8. <http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Branks>
9. L'Inconnue de la Seine, <http://www.commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inconnue.jpg>

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## Was That Infinity or Affinity? Applying Insights From Translation Studies to Qualitative Research Transcription<sup>1</sup>

*Jen Ross*

**Key words:**

qualitative  
research;  
transcription;  
translation studies;  
visibility; power;  
foreignisation;  
domestication

**Abstract:** Despite a small but compelling body of literature arguing that transcription represents a key moment of choice and the exercise of power in the research process, many qualitative researchers appear to believe (or at least proceed as if they believe) that transcription is relatively unproblematic. Translation studies and its engagement with visibility, power, authenticity and fidelity has a lot to offer to qualitative researchers working critically with transcription theory and practice. This paper explores the translation studies theories of equivalence, overt and covert translation, foreignisation and domestication, and the remainder, and demonstrates some fertile connections between transcription and translation. These connections help us to think about some broader political and cultural issues in relation to transcription and academic discourse, the complexity of equivalence and the central role of the situated transcriber.

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## 1. Introduction

"Do I believe 'in fidelity to the original,' you ask. Yes, yes, not because it's possible, but because one must try." (SPIVAK, 2001, p.14)

Many qualitative researchers will recognise the sentiment SPIVAK, though talking about translation, expresses above: the notion of "fidelity to the original" is one that troubles and challenges those of us working critically with an understanding of language as non-transparent, meaning as situated, and the power of interpretation as fundamental to meaning making. [1]

1 This paper emerged from a seminar presented by the author at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, 10 February 2009, as part of their Translations, Adaptations and Modalities research theme.

The following extract came from an interview I first encountered in transcript form (i.e.: I did not have access to the recordings, and was not present at the interview itself):

"it was a first ever class I had taught, he was one of the first students I knew, it's something that you know he was at the university as long as I was, so when he left he had been there four years, I had been there four years, so I sort of have had an infinity with him." (Extract from an interview transcript) [2]

"Infinity with" as opposed to "affinity with" was *probably* an error in the transcription of this interview, but I chose in my analysis not to correct it, as it served as a reminder of how full of meaning-making the transcription function is, and that there are many other places where "errors" and decisions on the transcriber's part will not be visible. This insight is not a new one, as we will see. Nevertheless, many qualitative researchers appear to believe (or at least proceed as if they believe) that transcription is relatively unproblematic in the sense that *either* meaning is totally separate from form and therefore transcription choices are merely a matter of preference (or budget), *or* that meaning is intrinsically bound to form but that an accurate *transformation* can be produced. [3]

I believe that transcription represents a key moment of choice and the exercise of power in the research process. TILLEY and POWICK (2002, p.292) make this point, using a metaphor of translation:

"In our research on transcription, we critique the naive realism that leaves unquestioned the possibility of an objective transcriber, and ignores the complexities of transcription, which resemble more the work of translation than that of transference ... We argue with Lapadat and Lindsay and others that transcription is an interpretive act." [4]

Translation offers us more than just a metaphor, though. The field of translation studies has been engaging with the complexities of translation for more than 30 years, and scholars in that field share many concerns with qualitative researchers (TEMPLE, 2002, p.846). It offers a very rich body of theoretical work which we can draw on to get new perspectives on what is at stake in our transcription practices. This paper is an attempt to apply some of the insights and debates in translation studies to the theory and practice of transcription, paying special attention to the idea of visibility—of translator, translation, and process. [5]

I do this by first giving some brief background to the literature on research transcription and on translation studies, then discussing how important translation studies theories of equivalence, foreignisation and domestication, assumptions and the remainder have implications for research transcription. Finally, I offer some comments about how the work I have done around transcription and translation is impacting on my research practice, and how I think this productive critical connection might be taken forward. [6]

## 2. Research Transcription in Context

"The problems of selective observation are not eliminated with the use of recording equipment. They are simply *delayed* until the moment at which the researcher sits down to transcribe the material from the audio- or videotape." (OCHS, 1979, p.44)

"By neglecting issues of transcription, the interview researcher's road to hell becomes paved with transcripts." (KVALE, 1996, p.166)

In 2000, Judith LAPADAT criticised the lack of attention given to the issues and complications inherent in transcription (p.204). The transformation of speech to text is a component of many qualitative methods in social science research. Interviews and focus groups are routinely used as techniques of data generation, and these events are typically recorded with an audio recorder and later *transcribed*, either by the interviewer or another researcher or, as commonly, by someone outside the immediate research project or setting—an external transcriber<sup>2</sup>. [7]

Despite its widespread use and importance in qualitative research, approaches to transcription in qualitative research literature were, and remain, varied. Many general texts are more or less silent on the matter. For example, DENZIN and LINCOLN (2005), one of the most widely cited of mainstream qualitative research texts, barely mentions transcription, and only one chapter (peripherally) discusses it as a potential site of interest (CHASE, 2005, p.665). Other literature tends to focus on practicalities such as cost and time, as LAPADAT and LINDSAY point out (1999, p.77), but not the epistemological or methodological implications of transcription. [8]

Others take transcription seriously as a research challenge, but maintain that it *can* be done accurately. SILVERMAN claims that transcripts can "offer a highly reliable record" (2001, p.13), and calls on researchers to adopt some of the practices of conversation analysis (CA). CA, which studies talk and interaction, employs standardised conventions, symbols and notation to attempt to capture, in text, features of breath, pause, changes in pitch and volume, and emphasis from recordings of conversations. CA transcripts are extremely detailed, in response to analysts' need to meticulously examine these different aspects of talk. For example:

21	Zoe	w'(h) are you ta(h)lking to it while you
22		WORK?
23	Lyn	no:,
24		(.5)
25	Lyn	[heh heh °heh heh°=

2 This is a practice which is fraught with many complications around the low status of the work, lack of guidance and context given to transcribers, and the effects of transcriber distance from the research, which are well documented by TILLEY and POWICK (2002).

26	Zoe	[hh what ye' DOINg then
27	Lyn	=hahh hahh hahh
28		(1.0)
29	Zoe	wh't's the ↑point:h
30		(1.5)
31	Zoe	↑oh ↑go:d (.) look what ↑I'm wearing (ANTAKI, 2009, n.p.) [9]

These transcription practices produce texts which bear little resemblance to typical academic prose, but the record of pause lengths and specialised notation, for example, imply that these texts are scientific, technical and precise. [10]

Authors working in other traditions tend to dismiss the idea of a "reliable" transcription. A "post-structuralist turn" (DAVIES & DAVIES, 2007) in the social sciences has opened up questions about the relationship of language and meaning. LAPADAT and LINDSAY (1999) point out the irony of replicating discredited assumptions of transparency in transcription practices (1990, p.65), while RIESSMAN notes that "transforming spoken language into a written text is now taken quite seriously because thoughtful investigators no longer assume the transparency of language" (1993, p.12). KVALE (1996) devotes a whole chapter in his popular book on interviewing to transforming speech to text, and he encourages readers to think of transcriptions as "interpretive constructions": "the question 'What is the correct transcription?' cannot be answered—there is no true, objective transformation from the oral to the written mode. A more constructive question is: 'What is a useful transcription for my research purposes?'" (pp.165-66). [11]

Narrative analysts such as RIESSMAN and MISHLER look at stories as important units of meaning, and are often interested in the effect of the way that researchers choose to represent oral narratives in written form on the page, since "textual display, a re-presentation of speech, is in itself a rhetorical device" (MISHLER, 2003, p.304). MISHLER gives several examples of the same stretch of talk, transcribed in different ways, to illustrate that "transcriptions of speech, like other forms of representation in science, reflexively document and affirm theoretical positions" (2003, p.310). In other words, transcripts are highly individual, saying as much about the transcriber as the transcribed. Attempting "fidelity to the original", in this case, is an interpretive and perhaps even creative process on the part of the transcriber—whomever he or she may be, and whatever his or her relationship to the research. [12]

Even if we accept the non-transparency of transcription as a positive—or at least unavoidable—part of the research process, though, this does not mean that we understand all the implications and limitations of our choices. Theories of translation offer some new ways of seeing these choices and constraints, and I believe they can help move the theoretical discussion and debate about transcription forward in fruitful new directions. [13]

### 3. Some Background to Translation Studies

Translation theory and practice has been written about for centuries but, according to BASSNETT (1996), the field of translation studies emerged in the 1970s, in parallel with "polysystems theory" (systems within systems, of which the literary system is one, and the social system thought to be another—CLASSE, 2000, p.1098) in the humanities and an increasing resistance to the conception of translation as a "secondary, second class activity" (BASSNETT, 1996, p.12). In the decades since, theorists in the field have drawn extensively from post-colonial, post-structuralist and feminist theory, literary studies, linguistics, anthropology and translation's own long history. BASSNETT traces a shift in emphasis from history in the 1970s, to power in the 1980s and visibility in the 1990s (1996, p.22). These themes continue to be important today, along with what VENUTI calls an "ethics of difference" (1998)—an emphasis on diversity, difference and the politics of otherness. Theories of globalisation and networks are also coming to the fore in translation studies today (CRONIN, 2003). [14]

VENUTI, in the introduction to his "Translation Studies Reader", describes the collection's scope and organisation as follows:

"Selections can be grouped to explore basic concepts of language (instrumental vs hermeneutic), key theoretical concepts (translatability and relative autonomy, equivalence and shifts, reception and function), recurrent translation strategies (free vs literal, dynamic vs formal, domesticating vs foreignising), and various cultural and political issues (identity and ideology, power and minority situation)" (2005, p.7). [15]

The ideas I am touching on in this paper: equivalence, overt and covert translation, foreignisation and domestication, and the remainder, take up and cut across themes of power, visibility and otherness. Although I will push what I see as the parallels between translation and transcription in the social sciences as far as I can in what follows, it seems important to say that some of the most compelling ideas and themes in translation studies—the marginalisation and othering of cultural difference, globalisation and the politics of language and the canon—cannot be adequately addressed in such a comparison. I recommend VENUTI's work (1998), as well as that of BASSNETT (1980, 1996), BAKER (2005) and HERMANS (1996, 2002) for those wishing to learn more about translation studies beyond what is discussed in this paper. [16]

### 4. Equivalence

One of the key theoretical contributions of translation studies is in the evolving and contested understanding of what makes a good translation—fidelity and equivalence are complex and shifting concepts which are deeply engaged with by translation scholars. Indeed, equivalence would seem to be a shared central issue in both transcription and translation: how to create a target-text which bears the closest possible relationship to the source-text (or data). What this actually means, or what a "good translation" might be, is the subject of much debate in translation studies. For example, HOUSE (2006) argues that equivalence is



extremely complex, as it is socially and historically determined, and affected by the constraints of specific languages, linguistic and social conventions, as well as the translator's comprehension, creativity, and implicit theories (2006, p.344). She makes the distinction between overt and covert translation—a covert translation

"is a translation which enjoys the status of an original source text in the target culture. The translation is covert because it is not marked pragmatically as a translation of a source text but may, conceivably, have been created in its own right" (p.347). [17]

An overt translation, on the other hand, "is not as it were a 'second original'" (ibid.) and not directed at the target audience. A translator producing a covert translation is therefore concerned with equivalence at a contextual (social, cultural) level, while someone producing an overt translation might be more concerned with equivalence at a textual level (creating a word-for-word match, for example). [18]

The difference between contextual and textual equivalence is illustrated simply by BASSNETT (1980), who gives as an example a description of the English word "butter" and the Italian word "burro". Both refer to the same substance, but the cultural significance and practical uses of butter in Britain are quite different from *burro* in Italy, so "the problem of equivalence here involves the utilization and perception of the object in a given context. The *butter-burro* translation, whilst perfectly adequate on one level, also serves as a reminder ... that each language represents a separate reality" (p.19). [19]

In transcription, we might consider a covert transcription as one which blends in seamlessly to material which was "born" textual, while an overt transcription might look more like what is often called "verbatim" transcription—marked by its origins in speech: repetition, hesitation, stumbles and interruptions, for example. The former would achieve equivalence in the sense that it provided readers with a comfortable reading experience, that it gave the appearance of transparency of meaning, and that it did not break the flow of prose or stand out in an academic text. The latter might achieve equivalence by recording (or attempting to record) each verbal utterance as text, even if it drew attention to itself by being manifestly un-text-like. [20]

HOUSE maintains that different types of translation are appropriate for different purposes, and this may be the case with transcription as well. However, the decision about which to attempt is complicated by the significant practical and political implications of visibility (of the translator and the translation). The rest of this paper is devoted to these implications. [21]

## 5. (In)visibility 1: Domestication and Foreignisation

VENUTI's concepts of domestication and foreignisation are extremely useful in theorising transcription practices. These concepts are essentially a reworking of HOUSE's overt and covert translation model, where domestication implies assimilation to dominant "home" values of the target culture, while foreignisation is a deliberate othering or making strange of the target text to highlight its source in another place and/or time. [22]

What sets VENUTI's concepts apart, however, is his attention to the political and ideological implications of translation and the way he links these strategies explicitly to concerns of power, subordination and cultural marginalisation. He argues that translation is "fundamentally ethnocentric", and that "the very function of translating is assimilation, the inscription of a foreign text with domestic intelligibilities and interests" (VENUTI, 1998, p.11). Later he draws on BERMAN, who writes of the problems of ethnocentrism and the desirability of preserving "foreignness": "A bad translation I call the translation which, generally under the guise of transmissibility, carries out a systematic negation of the strangeness of the foreign work" (BERMAN, 1992, p.5). [23]

BUCHOLTZ (2000), in her work on the politics of transcription, identifies many important ways in which transcription can demonstrate attitudes towards race, otherness and power, for example. To this I would add that considering the politics of transcription in terms of foreignisation and domestication invites a look at academic discourse in the social sciences and the privileged status of what is generally thought of as "academic" prose over alternative forms of knowing and expression. As BAYNE argues, the scholarly written text "is still the primary marker of academic legitimacy. The linear, logically-developing scholarly text, with its hierarchical structure and build toward conclusion, is still the primary expression of the academic mind" (2006, p.1). [24]

If we consider academic writing as the dominant mode of discourse in the social sciences, then it becomes possible to explore transcription as an act of either domestication to or foreignisation from that discursive centre. The question: "Can a translator maintain a critical distance from domestic norms without dooming a translation to be dismissed as unreadable?" (VENUTI, 1998, p.84) becomes highly relevant to transcription, and indeed helps us to understand some of the discomfort and resistance to more verbatim forms of transcription in academic writing and publishing. For example, a recent referee's report for a paper I co-authored included the following comment: "my view is that the reproduction of the interviewee's verbal tics (such as 'um') may be the convention but it is irrelevant and obtrusive". This reader manifestly did not wish to be reminded that the interview data we were presenting was not born textual. [25]

The referee went further, however, and suggested that our form of transcription "undermines the authority of the interviewee in contrast to the authority of the academic text". The issue of authority explored in some detail by NESPOR and BARBER (1995), as they explain that they invited interviewees to edit and rewrite

portions of the transcripts made from their interviews in order to protect them from looking "ignorant", or like "subordinate writers" in contrast to the academic prose of the researchers. They further argue that: "researcher-writers say of 'faithful' transcripts that 'that's the way people really speak' ... but that is never completely true. People do not speak on paper" (NESPOR & BARBER, 1995, p.57). [26]

Is it the case that most people are so unfamiliar with the difference between speech and writing that they would consider a verbatim transcription to imply ignorance? It would seem so, but this does not necessarily suggest that we ought to protect *their* ignorance. And, while the argument that NESPOR and BARBER make—that attempting to capture the flow of conversation in transcription is misguided, as "people do not speak on paper"—may on the face of it seem sensible, foreignising strategies are not necessarily bound to notions of accuracy. Indeed, as BAYNE argues of non-linear digital texts (2006, p.1), transcriptions may usefully problematise and destabilise domestic norms of academic writing, and allow us to recognise them as constructed, not transparent, forms. [27]

WATSON gets at the same idea in a different way—talking of the relocation of the researcher in relation to the data that transcription makes necessary:

"Metaphors of transcription tend to emphasize a process by which a fluid and dynamic interaction is made static and thus necessarily reduced. ... The transcript needs to be reconstituted through analysis and bears much the same relationship to the original data as a prune, when rehydrated, does to a plum. But prunes are not necessarily inferior to plums; rather, they do 'being fruit' in different ways. Whereas the interview is the immediate immersed research context, the transcription serves to relocate the researcher enabling a different relationship to the data to be developed" (2006, p.374). [28]

However, while appearing to celebrate this relocation, she immediately goes on to point out that "an ironic feature of transcription is that the greater the attempt to convey nuance through transcription conventions the less natural the transcription appears" (ibid.). If we attempt to include foreignised transcripts in our analyses and publications, there will inevitably be a strangeness to the texts we produce. The question is, do we do more harm or more good in making our translations and transcriptions visible, and perhaps able to be dismissed as impossibly other? As VENUTI asks, "to what extent does such an ethics [of difference] risk unintelligibility, by decentering domestic ideologies, and cultural marginality, by destabilizing the workings of domestic institutions?" (1998, p.84) [29]

Indeed, foreignisation can render strange and essentially "other" not only the text but also the source culture, thereby inviting a domestic audience to observe at a distance, and to marginalise a foreign culture as hopelessly different and unreachable, and possibly, in the presence of a colonial impulse, needing intervention. CARBONELL argues that "the processes of cultural difference allow desired knowledges that satisfies the needs of the West, rather than the

knowledge genuinely deployed by the Other (either the East, the Third World, the Primitive or even the Ancient)" (1996, p.92). [30]

The translator's dilemma is clearly ours as well, as "the differences between the oral and the written language contexts become critical through the transcription from an oral to a written modality (MISHLER, 1991)" (KVALE, 1996, p.44). BUCHOLTZ distinguishes between naturalised and denaturalised transcriptions, and, following OCHS, calls for proponents of each style of transcription to "unsettle" and experiment with the other to see what difference it makes, and what they can learn (2000, pp.1461-2). [31]

However, sometimes the component parts of the process of translation—the text, or the translator—reveal themselves whether or not we choose them. This brings us on to assumptions, accidents and LECERCLE's (1990) notion of the "remainder". [32]

## 6. (In)visibility 2: Assumptions, Accidents and Reminders

### 6.1 Assumptions and accidents

The effects of the translator and transcriber emerge not only from their conscious strategies, but also from the unconscious assumptions (and errors) they make. Sometimes in *translation* these assumptions are brought starkly to light by the passage of time or alternative translations; in qualitative research transcription this will rarely if ever be the case<sup>3</sup>. [33]

This may be one reason why translation studies has addressed this issue in such depth: it has become clear that reasonable people can disagree about the best way to translate any given passage. The entire debate about equivalence rests on this premise. BAKER identifies as a key discourse of translation the depiction of translators as "honest and detached brokers who operate largely in the 'spaces between' cultures ... who can transcend any cultural or political affiliation, at least while they're engaged in the highly romanticised task of translating" (2006, p.11). She problematises this discourse in the context of cultural meta-narratives, and argues that "no one, translators included, can stand outside or between narratives" (p.12). This echoes the arguments of many qualitative researchers; OLIVER, SEROVICH and MASON, for example, explain that "a transcriber hears the interview through his/her own cultural-linguistic filters" (2005, p.1282). [34]

A recent accident provides a fortunate opportunity for an example. A set of interview recordings was sent out to a transcription company, who had several transcribers working on them. One recording was accidentally transcribed twice, by two different transcribers. Each had access to the same audio file, style sheet and list of words and phrases which were likely to appear, and the instruction to

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3 In large part this is due to the almost ubiquitous commitment to anonymity that researchers make to their interviewees, which make audio or video recordings off limits to anyone outside the research team. In an important sense, therefore, the transcript, not the recording, *becomes* the original in a way a translation may not seem to.

transcribe verbatim, noting pauses, laughter and other non-linguistic happenings where possible. [35]

It would be possible to choose literally any part of these two transcripts to illustrate the point that no two people hear or represent in the same way—from the very first line, the transcripts differ. In fact, one transcript is 25 pages long, and the other is 82! However, the extract below illustrates, I think, that the line between an error and an assumption may be very fine indeed.

Extract 1 (transcriber A):

IE: you know, this is—there was a huge long phase right at the beginning of all of this when all of us together collectively struggled, because nobody knew what this thing was, you know, we were trying to create something and what did it do and what could it do, and, um, particularly because we had to make these things and then the technology, if you like, came afterwards, um, what's going to be very different now is that the technology is there upfront, and you're populating something that exists, um, I think one of the things that—I'm sure it's not just me, everybody has struggled with all the way through, is how much you might want to say to your user in terms of words, this—online things are quite clunky. Well, here's a bit of background information that you need to know, for you to—I mean, giving up, also what we've been doing on history [resources], you know, launch cold into—to make sensible judgments in history you actually have to know something about what you're dealing with and how you deal with all of that issue, how you deal with just plunging into the middle of something and not being—I mean I set these couple of maths ones for my things, I must have been mad, I was a primary school teacher, I have taught lots of primary maths in my time, it was rather a long time ago.

Extract 2 (transcriber B):

IE: So, you know, there's a huge, great, long phase right at the beginning of all of it...

IV: Uhuh ...

IE: When all of us, together, collectively struggled because nobody knew what this thing was, you know

IV: Mmhm

IE: We were trying to create something and what did it do and what could it do?

IV: Ahuh...

IE: And, um ... particularly because we had to make these things and then... the technology, if you like, came afterwards

IV: yeah

IE: Um ... What's going to be very different now, is that the technology is there up front and you're populating something that exists

IV: Mmhm ...

IE: um ... I think one of the things that—I'm sure it's not just me—everybody has struggled with, all the way through ... is, how much you might want to say to your user

IV: Mmhm

IE: In terms of words ... because ...

IV: Right, okay, in what way?  
IE: online things are quite funky ...  
IV: Right  
IE: Well ... here's a bit of background information that you need to know before you...  
IV: Okay  
IE: You know ... and we've given up also what we've been doing on history [resources] ...  
IV: Mmhm  
IE: You know, launch cold into ... [pause] to make sensible judgements in history, you had to actually know something about ...  
IV: Right  
IE: Something you're dealing with and how you deal with all of that issue  
IV: Uhuh ...  
IE: How you deal with just plunging into the middle of something  
IV: Okay  
IE: Um ... and not being ... I mean I've [unclear 14.23] there's a couple of maths ones for my sins—I must be mad! [Laughter] You know, I was a primary schoolteacher, I have taught lots of binary maths in my time; it was just a rather long time ago ...  
IV: [chuckle] [36]

The description of "online things" as either "funky" or "clunky" made quite a difference to the point the interviewee is making—she is either celebrating or bemoaning the current state of technology, and the need for interventions by teachers in online learning contexts, and which is which hinges on that word. In transcription as in other contexts, "what people hear depends on what they expect to hear" (HUTCHINS & KLAUSEN, 2000, p.5), and these assumptions at the transcribing stage can greatly affect the resulting analysis of research data. [37]

There are many other discrepancies between the two extracts. My aim here is not to "lament variability" (BUCHOLTZ, 2002, p.785), but to ask (as BUCHOLTZ does) what it might imply. For the biggest difference between the extracts—both ostensibly "verbatim"—is what the transcriber has chosen to do with the interviewer's interjections. In Extract 1, these are excised completely. The transcriber believed or decided in this case that the interviewer's turns in this stretch of talk were not relevant. Indeed, in themselves they might not carry much meaning. Arguably the same information is conveyed in both extracts. However, Extract 2 gives a much different impression of what was *happening* than Extract 1: it shows the interviewer encouraging, laughing, and asking for clarification and expansion, it implies a level of rapport and sympathy between the people in the conversation. Extract 1 is far more prose-like, and more expository. It makes it sound as if the interviewee is volunteering information without prompting. It erases its own context. This could be a result of the transcriber being tired, pressed for time, or bored, but it could just as easily reflect his or her implicit assumptions about the nature of interviews, conversation or research. [38]

## 6.2 Remainders

Sometimes the nature of the text itself makes the translator more visible. Some theorists have argued, in fact, that there will always be inadvertent gain associated with translation, because words always have meanings and associations which differ between languages. LECERCLE (1990) calls this gain "the remainder", and VENUTI notes that it "violates ... the 'virtual reality' created in the translation ... because the variables it contains can introduce a competing truth or break the realist illusion" (1998, p.22). The realist illusion is broken by some texts in especially apparent ways—DERRIDA's work is a frequently cited example. HERMANS (2002) recounts a story of a passage in which DERRIDA:

"having used the term 'fake-out', carries on for a few sentences and then suddenly retraces his steps, wondering 'I cannot imagine how Sam Weber is going to translate "fake-out"' (1997b: 213); it is a peculiar statement to make, for in the translation we are reading the term has already been translated by Sam Weber, a few sentences earlier, without a hitch. ... In anticipating what subsequently turned out to be a non-problem for the translator, Derrida not only implicated the translator in the translation, but allowed us to register Weber's discursive presence in the curious situation where, having adequately dealt with 'contre-pied' as 'fake-out', the translator is taken back to the corresponding French term which he is now obligated to leave untranslated ..." (p.14). [39]

Calling this a "convoluted case", HERMANS goes on to cite a more straightforward example of a translator being forced to draw attention to a translation, and argues that: "in manifestly declining to be translated ... the passage reminds the reader that behind the words as they appear on the page there is another discourse in a different language" (p.15). [40]

Such rem(a)inders can appear noticeably in transcripts as well, as with this extract from a recent interview between my colleague and a school pupil, talking about technology in schools:

Pupil: "But the annoying thing is, the really annoying thing about the restrictions on these computers that gets me so angry, I'm actually putting my hand up and down really quickly, you can't obviously see that because it's on a tape recorder ..." [41]

This breaking of the illusion that the transcript can capture everything—a reminder of what is lost—is only part of what makes this interesting. In signalling his awareness of the digital recorder and its purpose (to provide a recording which stands in for the interview itself), the interviewee draws attention to the constructedness of both the situation and his account. The "you" he speaks to is not the interviewer he is conversing with, but the reader, through the transcriber. This playfulness and troubling of the process matters because, even when not made explicit in this way, transcriptions and translations *are* suspect, problematic, and utterly imperfect. They are laden with interpretation, mistakes, leftovers and strategies, whatever the extent to which the transcriber or researcher chooses to domesticate what remains. [42]

## 7. Conclusion: Moving Forward with Transcription

This paper has demonstrated some fertile connections between transcription and translation, connections which help us to think about some broader political and cultural issues in relation to transcription and academic discourse, the complexity of equivalence and the central role of the situated transcriber. I have certainly found these to be important ideas in my own development as a researcher. [43]

I started out in my own doctoral research project wanting each of my transcripts to be as faithful a representation of the interview as possible. For me this has always meant attempting to transcribe everything that is said, including repetition, stumbles and the rest, despite the messiness and troublesomeness of producing and then citing or working with these transcripts. For one thing, I thought, how would I decide what to leave out if I were to deliberately selectively transcribe? I told myself that I knew this was still my interpretation, and that I would be highly selective when I came to writing up my research, and I told myself I was acknowledging that. But I do not think I was. I really wanted my data to *sound authentic*, and I had not deeply examined what I meant by that. [44]

In her beautiful book about language and identity, "Lost in Translation", Eva HOFFMAN writes that " ... in my translation therapy, I keep going back and forth over the rifts, not to heal them but to see that I—one person, first-person singular—have been on both sides" (1998, p.273). I think doing this work around translation and transcription has freed me up to live with the contradictions in my practice. I still find myself trying to honour the voices in my interviews on their own terms, even while I am more aware now that what I make of them must, necessarily, be in my own voice. I have not given up on fidelity—"not because it's possible, but because one must try". [45]

However, I have a new goal now, too—to use my transcription practice to trouble and challenge the dominant discourse of academic writing in ways that leave more room for different modes and voices. I want the remainders, the foreignness and the accidents to be front and centre, because I believe that there is value in mess and uncertainty, and in problematising our reliance on certain forms of academic writing as "stable materialisations of the workings of the reasoning mind" (BAYNE, 2006, p.1), to the exclusion of all others. [46]

Reasonable people can and will disagree about this, and many research projects will not have representing interviewee voices or deconstructing the academy as goals. However, in this case a cigar is never just a cigar—all researchers should be alert to the negotiations and assumptions transcription involves. Not attending, not actively choosing, does not mean that no choice is being made, because "researchers make choices about transcription that enact the theories that they hold. If these theories and their relationships to research processes are left implicit, it is difficult to examine them or to interpret the findings that follow from them" (LAPADAT & LINDSAY, 1999, p.66). [47]



One unavoidable issue here is that transcribing in any but the most cursory of ways is extremely time consuming, and one thing researchers usually lack is time. We do not generally cost time for transcription in to our research bids, or if we do it is to pay external transcribers. It would be good to see more work that follows up on TILLEY and POWICK (2002) and McLELLAN, MacQUEEN and NEIDIG (2003), but which draws on translation studies literature and on the experiences of translators, and suggests strategies for working with external transcribers in ways which take account of the conceptual and theoretical issues in the transcription process. There is also every reason to believe that voice recognition software may someday soon be used for some forms of transcription (MATHESON, 2007), which will bring us a whole new set of questions about the meanings of accuracy and interpretation, and for which, again, we may be able to turn to translation studies for some insights. [48]

Going forward, I would also like qualitative researchers to do more work on foreignisation and domestication, understanding better how we shape our transcripts to meet or resist certain kinds of expectations and desires within the academy. [49]

Translation studies and its engagement with visibility, power, authenticity and fidelity has a lot to offer to qualitative researchers working critically with transcription theory and practice. We must continue to look for new perspectives and strategies which put transcription in its rightful place, as a crucial stage of meaning making in research, and an important subject for theoretical discussion and debate. [50]

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